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ARTHUR PORGES — WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM

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WALTER WRIGLEY, *Associate Director*
Instrumentation Laboratory
Department of Aeronautical Engineering
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The courses mentioned in this quotation were originally set up by Dr. C. S. Draper. Since Dr. Draper assumed the responsibility of Chairman of the Department of Aeronautical Engineering, Prof. Wrigley has taken over the teaching of these courses.

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 5, No. 6 DECEMBER

Two-Way Stretch (*short novelet*) *by* G. GORDON DEWEY & MAX DANCEY 3

Food to All Flesh *by* ZENNA HENDERSON 31

Night Life *by* ESTHER CARLSON 39

A Lady's Privilege (*verse*) *by* WINONA MCCLINTIC 45

Aurochs Came Walking *by* ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS 46

The Milk of Paradise *by* JEROME BARRY 61

Door to Door *by* GUY DEANGELIS 73

The Gastronomical Error (*short novelet*) *by* H. NEARING, JR. 85

Recommended Reading (*a department*) *by* THE EDITORS 104

The Dream Dust Factory *by* WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM 106

The Liberator *by* ARTHUR PORGES 118

Index 125

Cover by Emsh
(marooned on an asteroid)

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All entries must be postmarked not later than January 8th, 1954. The winning writer will be announced in our May, 1954 issue (on the stands in early April), and contest winners will be notified personally early in February.

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Two-Way Stretch

by G. GORDON DEWEY *and* MAX DANCEY

STEVE HARPER ran worried fingers through his tousled hair, stared at the papers on the table before him, then flung down his pencil and pushed them back with a snort of disgust. Frowning in annoyance, he glanced at the big body of Roger Wilkins, stretched out on the living room couch.

"You're the idea man, Roger," he said. "What do I do next?"

Roger stretched, yawned, and raised himself up on one elbow. "You in a bind?" he asked.

"Bind is no word for it. I've got a week. If I can't unload those telechrome tridaptors by Monday, the bank calls my loan. That cleans me out. Really out."

"And if you unload them?"

"I make 300 grand clear — and I can stop this sharpshooting."

"Nice pile — if you get it." Roger yawned again and sank back on the pillows. "Nice spot, too . . . What happened to Barger?"

"Didn't I tell you? I was in his office this afternoon. The deal was all set — we were ready to sign papers. He dropped dead! . . . I *did* tell you."

"Guess I wasn't listening. There must be other manufacturers —"

"Sure. Lots of them. The woods are full of them. But smoking out a cash buyer in a week — I don't have that kind of pressure. I'd tip my mitt — he'd know I was over the barrel if I tried to rush the deal, be just cagey enough to wait for someone to lower the boom on me."

"Tough." Roger let his eyes go shut lazily. "I'll try to con up an angle."

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Steve stared at him bitterly a moment, then turned back to the papers that held only one answer.

The front door chimes bing-bonged.

"Probably Ann or Terry," Roger muttered drowsily.

"They both got keys," Steve snapped. "Don't exert yourself — I'll get it."

He shoved back from the table, went out into the hallway, swung open the front door and peered into the darkness. It was a man, a stranger, standing on the porch. Steve switched on the light.

Dapper was the first word that came into his mind. Lord, but he'd never seen anything like it. Never anything quite so perfect. The man looked as though he'd stepped out of the proverbial fashion plate. Handsome, he was. Damned near *beautiful*, was Steve's impression. Built to match. There wasn't a flaw —

There *was* a flaw. The very perfection of him was wrong for life. The fabric of the tweed suit he wore showed as it would in a color plate. The woven strands were apparent in the material of his clothing, but over all there was the glossy slickness of a picture. There was no *feel* of roughness in the sight of the cloth.

Staring at the suit, ignoring its wearer, Steve almost reached out his hand to feel the material. Then he caught himself, embarrassed, and turned his gaze back to the stranger's face.

"Yes?" he said, inquiringly.

The stranger was smiling, very slightly, apparently not at all disturbed by Steve's almost rude concentration on his clothes. And suddenly Steve could feel the impact of the man's personality; caught the odd, intelligent humor in his face, the sureness of self in the clear blue eyes. And yet — there was a tinge of puzzlement on his face, too, which Steve felt did not belong. It bothered him.

The stranger spoke, in a clear, high-pitched but nevertheless melodious voice.

"Hello, Steve," he said. "Isn't Terry returned *yet?*"

Steve frowned, mentally off balance. "Unh, Terry — unh, no; he should be here before long — if he comes at all."

The stranger smiled, moved forward. "That is so excellent," he said. "You will renew the permission to await?"

Steve stepped back automatically, held the door wider. "Sure," he said, feeling a little bewildered. "Come on in and wait. . . . Say — how did you know my —"

"And Ann —" the stranger interrupted, "— is she now well? Entirely restored?"

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"Well? Restored?"

"That is so excellent, besides." The stranger's eyes were roving about the hallway, lively with interest. His gaze fell on a book lying on the hall table.

"Is this the book?" he asked.

Steve was beginning to feel that the conversation was like the general who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions. He shook his head in confusion.

"*The* book? Look, mister —"

"Morlan . . . Remember?"

"Marlin?"

"Morlan." There was, now, Steve thought, almost a touch of smugness in the stranger's smile. As though he were — superior.

"Okay," he snapped. "Morlan . . . You're talking in riddles —"

Morlan's light, musical laugh interrupted him. "I'm still the unsolver of that riddle."

"Riddle? What riddle?"

It was the stranger's turn to frown in annoyance. "You do not memorize? . . ." He hesitated. "The one about the twist and the dawn."

Steve felt his face darkening with anger. "How does it go?"

"But from you —" Then Morlan laughed again. "I understand. This is the saying of it: Why is a twist in the tracks like the sound of the dawn?"

Steve repeated it to himself, then shook his head.

"You do not have the answer?"

Again Steve shook his head in bewilderment. Then, with sudden decision, he motioned the stranger toward the living room. After all, the guy wanted to see Terry. Maybe Terry could figure him out. If Terry could come down to earth long enough to take the trouble.

The floor vibrated to the tread of heavy feet, and Roger was in the hall behind him.

"What's all the palaver?" he asked.

Looking back on it, Steve couldn't be sure just how it happened — it was that fast. He thought the stranger put up his fists defensively. Roger insisted later that the dapper man threw the first punch.

Roger's left jab, rapier-swift, was through the stranger's guard; and Morlan, grunting from the impact, took quick little backward steps to hold his balance.

Recovering fast, he came back, shifting, weaving, and suddenly Roger, trained boxer though he was, was swinging wildly, blindly, unable to parry that shifty unorthodox attack. He seemed clumsy, awkward, as he staggered back, utterly routed. His heel caught on a throw rug and he went down, shaking the house as his body hit the floor. He groaned; then went limp.

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Steve was too astonished to move. Morlan had been outweighed by at least 60 pounds. It just didn't add up. The dapper man adjusted the bracelet he wore on his left wrist — his amazing suit wasn't even disarranged.

Morlan was smiling again. "Roger has no harm," he said with assurance. "But I must see Terry. It is a matter of time —"

"Well," Steve said dubiously, with a sidelong glance at Roger's supine form, "I guess it's all right to wait — if the war's over."

"But the war is not over. That's why we need —" Morlan hesitated, seemed nonplussed. He grinned, sheepishly, Steve thought. Then his gaze slid past Steve.

Steve turned. The big man was struggling to his feet. He came forward, uncertainly, put up his fists. His face was dark with rage.

Morlan retreated, warily. Roger charged, and Steve grabbed him around the waist. Struggling, cursing, Roger plunged forward, trying to break free.

He snatched the book from the hall table and flung it blindly toward Morlan. Off balance from the throw, he yielded to Steve's sudden tug and went stumbling back toward the living room.

Morlan caught the book easily, bracelet gleaming as he grasped for it. He glanced at it swiftly, smiled, then slipped it into his jacket pocket.

"Tell Terry Morlan will maintain the appointment," he said, waved to Steve, and went out into the night.

Steve's thoughts were still whirling as he closed the front door and went back into the living room. Roger, standing spread-legged on the wrinkled rug, regarded him with hot eyes.

"Who was that little jerk?" he demanded harshly.

Steve stared at him moodily. "Never saw him before. . . . I thought you knew him — the way you two got along you'd think you were old friends. Why'd you swing on him?"

"Me?" Swift surprise sponged the anger from Roger's face. "Me swing on him? I was just asking what you two were yammering about so long, and all of a sudden this character is making passes at me. I don't get it." He rubbed his jaw musingly. "He sure packs a wallop, for his size. Never saw a fighting style like that. Would sure like to work out with him." He grimaced then, and blinked, as though in pain.

"Could be you can. . . . Headache?"

"Splitting," Roger said tightly. "That sock on the button didn't help it any." He went back to the couch and threw himself down on it.

The front door opened, closed, and two people came into the room. Ann and Terry. Ann Verlain, petite, golden-blonde, elfin-featured. Terry Adler, detached, dark, taciturn. Steve's friends, and Roger's.

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"Hi." Ann's eyes were on the rumpled rug. "Something happen?"

Roger had not moved. Eyes closed, both hands were pressed to his head. He grunted inarticulately.

Steve tried to brush it off. "Nothing much," he said. "Someone was here — fellow by the name of Morlan. He was asking for Terry."

Terry raised inquiring eyebrows. "Say what he wanted?"

"Not quite," Steve said, trying to remember. "Seemed to feel that it was important — that he needed you. . . . He asked about you too, Ann." Steve regarded her curiously. "Feel all right?"

Ann frowned. "Never felt better in my life. Why?"

"This guy, Morlan, talked as though he thought you'd been sick, or something. Does he know you?"

"He doesn't sound like anyone I know. What does he look like?"

Steve described Morlan — his clothes, too. Both shook their heads, and Ann said, "He's a stranger to us. Funny that he'd know our names."

"He called me by name, too," said Steve, remembering. "Must be some door-to-door pitchman. . . ." His voice trailed off uncertainly. As an answer, that just didn't add up.

Terry was regarding him with cool detachment. "Did he leave any message?"

"Only to tell you he was here. I got the impression that he would be back, maybe tomorrow. Will you be around?"

Terry shook his head. "I doubt it. I'm working on something . . ."

"Another book on subspace?"

Terry hesitated, seemed to be searching for the right words. "Well . . . yes and no. That was only the beginning. Like the first in a line of dominoes."

Steve knew that his face mirrored the blankness of his mind. Almost like talking to the stranger — except that he knew Terry at least made sense, his kind of sense.

Terry was talking. "I'll try to explain it to you. Where's that copy of my book?"

"*Lacunation of Subspace* . . . et cetera?"

Terry nodded.

"Well," Steve faltered, and despite himself his gaze shifted over toward the couch. "There was a little trouble —"

Roger sat up. "He started it," he rasped.

Ann laughed. "What happened?"

Steve told her, while Roger's scowl deepened.

Terry said, "I can see why he didn't wait. . . . It doesn't matter — he'll be back. There's another copy in my car. Remind me to leave it."

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They talked a few minutes longer, and then Ann and Terry said goodnight. Roger walked out with them, and Steve went back to his papers and his problem of finding a way to evade financial ruin where no such way existed.

Roger came back in, carrying a book which he tossed on the table before Steve.

"No matter how many times I read that title," he snorted, "it gets me. *Lacunation of Subspace through Mental Control of Certain Posited but Unformulated Non-Mechanical Extensions.* Now, there's a title for you."

Steve looked up. "It's sold almost 1500 copies; that makes it a runaway best-seller in its field. I can't even read it, let alone understand it. Terry's plenty smart — a thousand, ten thousand years ahead of the rest of us. Einstein says he is building a brand new science."

Roger shrugged and went back to the couch.

That was Monday.

Tuesday Steve got a call from Television Corporation of the World. Jackman, TCW big wheel, offered him $80,000 for the telechrome tridaptor units. He laughed and hung up when Steve told him he'd have to up his bid, or no deal.

Steve regarded the phone bitterly for a moment, then grabbed his hat and went out. Jackman wasn't the only fish in the brook. He laughed, sourly. Already he was thinking of a potential buyer as a fish. It should be the other way around. He was the guy on the hook, on the way out to where it was high and dry.

Nine hours later, hot, tired, disgusted, he came home. The house was empty. Roger, he remembered, had a dinner date with some babe he was sweet-talking. Terry would be in his laboratory — he was pouring all his time into whatever he was working on. Ann was probably with him, helping as much as she could.

He started for the kitchen, then realized he had no appetite. Maybe a few quick ones would loosen up the kinks in his brain, as well as relax the body. He poured a drink, lit a cigarette and slumped down on the couch to think.

The door chimes, startlingly loud in the stillness of the house, bing-bonged. Steve hesitated, not really wanting to talk to anyone. Roger, Ann, Terry — all had keys. Unless Terry had lost his again. That took care of the world's important people.

Morlan!

It had to be him again. Looking for Terry. Steve put down his drink and went to the door.

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It was Morlan.

The fashion plate. Slick and shiny, just out of the pages of some expensive magazine. Steve really liked that suit. Even better than before — it was a glinting brown worsted this time.

Grinning, he swung the door wide. "Roger's out for the evening, so it should be safe. Unless you want to take me on? Or maybe you'd rather watch, for a change — there's wrestling on the television."

Morlan showed surprise, but came in, moving with that easy self-assurance that matched the perfection of his clothing.

"It is of Terry I am expecting, of course. He is not here?"

Steve shook his head. "You never know about him. He came in last night, just after you left. I told him I thought you'd be back tonight."

There was no mistaking the disappointment on the dapper man's face. "Is it your permission to me for him to await?"

"Sure. Come on in and sit down."

They found seats in the living room. Morlan looked around, almost, Steve thought, as though he had never seen a room like this before, and was attempting to memorize each little detail of its arrangement.

Then that oddly disconcerting gaze of his fastened on Steve again.

"How is Ann? She should be feeling very recovered by now."

This time, Steve mentally resolved, he'd keep the conversation pinned down on safe grounds. "Ann? Why, she's fine. Nothing wrong. I checked with her last night. . . . Did you think she'd been sick?"

"Not sick — ill — but she has experienced hurt."

Steve pondered over that. Then he remembered the times when Ann, despite her deep and abiding love for Terry, had expressed the normal resentment that a vivacious girl would feel when Terry was so deep into one of his mental flights into uncharted intellectual regions that he seemed hardly aware of Ann's existence — and showed it.

"Yeah," Steve agreed, at last. "I guess you're right." This Morlan must know Ann and Terry, must have some connection with them that they'd forgotten. "Have you known them a long time?"

"Them?"

"Ann and Terry."

Morlan was smiling that superior little smile again. "Ann I have acquainted. At the healing. But I mostly desire to acquaint Terry — he has never acquainted me, but it is very significant."

Steve nodded, pretending an understanding he did not feel. It was odd, the way Morlan talked. No trace of an accent, but a queer choice of words. Very carefully, too; very precisely, as though wanting to be quite certain of what he was saying. No, it was being certain of the *way* he said it.

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"Roger's still miffed," Steve said. "Claims it wasn't his fault."

"Of course not. My concentration was on Ann at the moment — I was deprived of tact. And so I spoke as I would speak to —" He broke off abruptly, then said, "I will leave an apology and a hope for a forgetting."

Steve waved carelessly. "It's nothing; he'll get over it."

"I do not wish to be the source of annoyance —"

"It won't last," Steve assured him. "Roger was puzzled at the moment, just like I was puzzled over that riddle."

Morlan's face brightened. "You have the answer?"

Steve shook his head. "Give me time. If I can't figure it out, I'll tell you. Don't tell me what the answer is till I give up."

Morlan was frowning. "But you —" he began, almost expostulating.

He was interrupted by the sound of an automobile scraping against the curb in front of the house.

Morlan stood up, moved swiftly toward the door. Even in his surprise at the sudden action, Steve marveled at the way the suit flowed around his body as he changed position. It never lost its perfection of fit. Dapper *was* the word. And there was no faintest trace of a wrinkle to show that its wearer had been sitting for the better part of an hour.

"It is your friend Roger," Morlan said over his shoulder. "He will not be friendly; it is better that I depart. Tell Terry I will return tomorrow evening."

Steve followed him to the door, protesting. "Roger's out on a date — he won't be back for hours."

Morlan gave him a fleeting smile. "It's Roger." He made it a flat statement of fact. Then added, quickly, as he grasped the doorknob, "Is this the time for the book?"

"Book?" Steve stared, uncomprehending.

Morlan stood there a moment, expectant; then at the sound of heavy footsteps coming up the walk he pulled the door open and was through it and outside.

It was too late. Roger spotted him, hunched his big shoulders, and rushed in, swinging. Morlan sidestepped, elusive as smoke, was almost in the clear. Roger caught him by the left arm and held on. The smaller man gave a seemingly effortless twist, and something flashed in the dim rays from the porch light as he broke away and disappeared almost magically into the darkness.

Roger took two or three lumbering steps after him, then halted. Obviously he could not hope to match the speed of the fugitive.

Steve's gaze was caught by something glittering in the grass. He picked it up. It was Morlan's bracelet. Followed by Roger, he went back into the

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house and examined it in the brightness of the living room. It was plain, unadorned, a simple band of metal, widening out somewhat on the top. But a most curious metal — Steve had never seen anything like it.

At first sight one might say that it was silver. But who ever saw silver with that curious rosy gleam to it? A rosy gleam which seemed to be just below the outer surface of the bracelet, yet still appeared to be entirely through the metal. He tried to figure out how the catch worked. Put the ends together, and they held firmly. A slight twist freed them. He clasped the bracelet on his wrist; it fitted snugly, warmly, as though it belonged there. He liked the feel of it, decided to leave it on.

Roger was puffing. "He got away," he grumbled.

"Not really."

The big man reddened. "I could have taken him out there, with no rug to trip over."

"Sure. . . . Why're you home so early?"

"Headache." Then Roger showed surprise. "It's gone, now. . . . Was he in the house?"

"He waited awhile. He wants to get hold of Terry rather badly, I think. Said he'd be back tomorrow night."

"If he's got the nerve."

"He's got it. He's all right, Roger. Lay off the guy. . . . Say — why is a twist in the tracks like the sound of the dawn?"

Roger's eyes widened. "Hunh?"

"Forget it," Steve said, with a wave of his hand.

That was Tuesday.

Wednesday they'd just finished dinner when the chimes made them jump. Roger's chair clattered to the floor as he got to his feet.

Steve grinned, waved him down.

"Nix. Your turn with the disherinos. It's probably Ann — she called. . . . Remember, you're being nice tonight."

Roger grinned, sheepishly. "Sure."

"And you don't poke Morlan unless he swings first?"

"He can have first punch."

"Right."

It was Morlan. Dapper Morlan. There was that same glossy suit to admire: a soft pale blue, this time, with luminous green hairline stripes. Steve had to find out where he got his clothes. That material — out of the world —

Morlan smiled at Roger, who stood there wary and ready, then cocked an eyebrow at Steve.

"Is Terry within?"

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"Still no Terry. I told you how it was with him."

Morlan, still smiling, turned to go. "Perhaps he can be seen tomorrow night. Has he given a message?"

"No word . . . Stick around if you like. You never know when Terry might pop in."

Morlan opened his mouth to reply, but never had the chance. There was the sudden shocking scream of tires, the squeal of brakes clamped on hard — then the abrupt roar of a gunned motor, and a car fled into the night, its red tail light winking out in seconds. Both men stepped to the edge of the porch.

"That was close," Steve said.

"No," Morlan contradicted him. "A strike."

The whine of the speeding car's motor was fading in the distance.

"All I heard," insisted Steve, "was brakes and tires."

"Someone was collided."

Someone! Steve was thinking of another car.

They went out into the street, their eyes searching the darkness. Morlan spotted it first, an almost shapeless bundle flung near to the far curb.

"Hit and run, all right," muttered Steve resentfully.

It was a girl, lying very still, very crumpled. Steve knelt beside her, then uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Know her, Steve?"

Steve was trying to get a hand under the slack form, lift her. "Sure I know her," he rapped. "Terry's girl friend. I'd like to get my hands on —"

"Terry's?"

Steve felt himself being pushed aside. Morlan knelt down. His hands reached out, lightly touched the pale blur of Ann's face, moved over her body.

Steve watched a moment, then looked around, wondering about the nearest doctor. He vaguely remembered having seen a shingle someplace in the neighborhood —

"Help me, Steve."

"We'll have to get a doctor. Call the police. She can't be moved."

"I am a — doctor. We must take her inside. . . . Hurry, Steve."

They cradled Ann in their arms, her weight evenly distributed between them. Facing each other, walking sideways, feeling their way with cautious feet, they moved toward the house, slowly, carefully. Morlan would tell Steve to hurry. When Steve attempted to go faster, Morlan would tell him to be careful.

Roger was standing in the open doorway. He took one quick shocked look, then cleared off the couch. They laid their burden there, gently.

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Morlan, wordless now, moving with swift, efficient sureness, waved them back. Steve watched as he slipped off his jacket, rolled up the sleeves of that beautiful bluish shirt. Later, he could not remember whether or not there was a bracelet on Morlan's left wrist. And still later, he'd remember, half ashamed, that he should have returned the bracelet he picked up on the lawn. Yet in Morlan's presence, the impact of the man's personality was always enough to drive the memory of lots of things from his mind.

Morlan was asking for things, things from the kitchen, things from the bathroom. Once, in peremptory tones, he sent Roger to the drugstore.

Steve watched his hands, fascinated. They seemed to have a life of their own, as Morlan toiled over the girl's still form. Perhaps the strain of watching and of anxiety clouded his vision — but at times Steve thought that there were almost metallic glitterings and flashings as the dapper man's fingers performed their owner's will. Steve could never quite be sure just what was happening.

But two hours later Morlan looked up and nodded. His face was drawn — the only time Steve had seen it reflect a physical reaction — and streaked with perspiration.

Steve could feel the question showing on his face.

Even Morlan's voice was weary, not quite so lilting. "She'll have slumber until morning. Then she will be all right."

Steve sighed in relief. "It was close, wasn't it?"

"Close? Yes. . . . She was dead."

"Dead?" Steve almost shouted it, heard Roger's husky echo.

Morlan nodded. "She died just after we placed her on your couch. But I returned the life to her within a minute."

"But —" Steve knew the dead could be revived, provided — "*Here*, and without equipment? I never heard —"

"If the — doctor — knows what, exactly what, he does, many things have possibility."

Roger broke into the conversation. "That's fine," he said. "But what about bones, internal injuries?"

"She will have perfection, as before. No scars, no broken bones, no injuries. There will be weariness when she awakens, and she will not memorize, at first."

Steve found himself holding Morlan's jacket. The *felt* smoothness and the softness of the material were not quite real. It was, it had to be, plastic. It *looked* woven, but his fingertips told him that this was formed material. Yet, viewing it closely, he could distinctly see each separate strand and fiber, as in ordinary woven fabric.

Morlan rolled down his sleeves, shrugged back into the jacket. It flowed

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around him — and the suit still fitted with that same perfection, every crease as sharp as though it had just been pressed in, the garment yet gracefully yielding to his slumping shoulders. Face, eyes, posture showed the strain the man must have felt. He sank into a chair, and smiled at the two men.

"Doc," Roger blurted, "maybe you can help me. I get headaches — sharp pains knifing through my head. I've never found a doctor who could do anything for them."

Morlan's reply was almost automatic. Steve had the impression that he was bringing out conclusions already formulated and tucked away in the back of his mind.

"Psychosomatic imbalance, Roger. Your type will be bred out of the race. You're parasitic; a quasi-intellectual. You can think as well as another thinker, but that is not your course to follow. Your balance is not right for — civilization."

Roger's face darkened, and Steve eyed him warily. "I don't get it," the big man growled.

Morlan pointed to Steve. "Steve," he said, "has the expenditure of half his energy physically, and half mentally. This is to him a ratio, correctly. If you think as much as he does, you have to have increase of your physical output. Your balance should show physical energy expenditure of nine times that of mental output. Work to another ratio, and you have trouble."

Morlan stood up, glanced briefly at the book still lying on the living room table, then went toward the door. Steve followed him into the hall, had his thanks waved away.

"Just arrange acquaintance with Terry for me, Steve. . . . I'll be back tomorrow night. And —" he grinned "— if I have to give up on the riddle, supply to me the solution."

"Riddle?" In the excitement, Steve had forgotten all about that. "Oh, sure." He grinned back. "I'll compare answers with you, if I get it."

Steve found Roger still standing where he'd left him in the living room. He was frowning, looking very thoughtful. He glanced up as Steve came into the room.

"You know, Steve, Morlan could be right. I do feel better when I get plenty of physical workout. Just the same, I don't like to be called a chump. . . . And maybe," he hesitated over the words, "maybe I have been sort of, well, parasitic, living off of you this way . . ."

"Forget it." Steve clapped him on the shoulder. "He didn't call you a chump — exactly. . . . Let's get some blankets to cover Ann."

That was Wednesday.

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It was mid-morning the next day, after Roger had left the house with the avowed intention of finding work, that Ann awoke. Steve was jumpy. Four days to go, and he still had no idea where or how he could unload the tridaptors. Yet he'd not wanted to leave the girl alone; and he did not want to upset Terry with messages about her. He was wandering fretfully through the living room when he heard her groan.

He hurried to her side. Her eyelids were lifting slowly, as though she might be in pain. Then the eyes were wide, golden-brown in the bright morning light, and she was staring at Steve, her face filled with bewilderment.

"Steve?" She sat up, looked around. "What am I doing here? . . . Oh — I must have fallen. No, I was on my way over here, and —" She faltered, obviously not knowing what to say to go on with it.

Steve made it easy for her. "You got bumped by a road hog while you were crossing the street."

Ann began to feel herself, moving her arms and legs.

"Just grazed you. We got a doctor. He gave you a shot — that's why you're feeling dopey right now. He says you'll be all right. No damage."

She wanted to know all the details. Steve filled it in for her a little, then switched the subject to breakfast.

Ann stayed the rest of the morning, then decided she felt well enough to leave. Steve made her promise to go home and rest for the balance of the day, called a cab for her, saw her off, then returned to his own problems.

Damn it, Jackman was the logical outlet for those tridaptors, now that Barger was out of the picture. There just wasn't any other outfit big enough to swing that kind of a deal on short notice. Maybe if he went over and talked to Jackman, face to face, he could get out from under with half a hide. . . .

He'd thought Jackman might be difficult to see, but the girl in the outer office announced him without a moment's hesitation when he told her who he was.

Jackman, a big, oily-faced man oozing synthetic cordiality, smiled and waved him into a chair. "I've been expecting you, Harper," he said. He puffed at his cigar, eyeing Steve narrowly. "Ready to deal at my price?"

Steve, knowing that Jackman knew he was in a squeeze, felt resentment boiling up inside him. "Look, Jackman," he blurted. "Those tridaptors at my price are three times cheaper than you can make them, or buy them."

A smile creased the man's puffy face, but the eyes were bright and hard in their fat-upholstered sockets.

"Sure, sure," he said smoothly. "So they're a bargain at *your* price. I like bargains — at *my* price. Do we make a deal?"

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Tasting the bitterness of defeat, Steve slumped in the big easy chair. If he said yes, he'd get a little, and maybe he could sniff out another deal somewhere else, if the bank would give him some time. If he said no, he still had four days to find a buyer — There *was* no buyer to find. He twisted the bracelet around and around on his wrist, trying to decide. Jackman watched him, unblinkingly, shrewdly saying nothing.

Then Steve said: "Jackman, you'd cut your own mother's throat, if you could make a profit on it. You know my price is a fair one — you'll still clean up. . . ."

Amazingly, Jackman nodded. The smile was still pasted on his face, but it looked blurry. "You might be right, at that, Harper," he said. "Yes, I think you are. I hadn't looked at it that way."

Steve stared, gulped.

"What's your price, again?"

Steve could feel the hammering of his heart, could not believe that he was hearing aright. The words stuck in his throat. "Four — hundred — and — seventy — thousand," he whispered huskily.

"Sounds fair enough," said Jackman.

Steve watched with incredulous eyes, dazed, as the TCW magnate wrote his signature on a check, then pushed a button on his desk. The door opened and the receptionist appeared.

"Make this check out to Mr, Harper for $470,000," Jackman told the girl, "then take it to Winston for countersigning and bring it right back to me."

The girl was back with the check before Steve had really convinced himself that it was all happening. Still half-dazed, he found himself shaking hands with Jackman, promising immediate delivery, and being ushered out of the office. He risked one quick backward glance. Jackman was back behind his desk, was staring at Steve, puffing at his cigar in a series of short puffs. Then the door closed behind Steve and he got out fast.

Somehow he found his way to the bank, deposited the check, had it verified, pressured it through for immediate collection, then called the warehouse where the tridaptors were stored, and ordered instant delivery. He requested telephoned confirmation the moment delivery was completed.

Only then did he permit a huge sigh of relief, a sigh that whooshed up from below the roots; and only then did he realize at last that he was off the hook.

He wiped the dampness from his forehead, then frowned. This needed some figuring. It wasn't like Jackman to give in to any kind of deal without an argument; let alone deal at the other man's price.

And there were some other things in his mind, nagging at his thought-stream — he had a lot of figuring out to do.

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He went back to the house.

He was still lying on the couch, staring off into space, working through his second pack of cigarettes, when Roger came home, five hours later.

Roger was the first to speak. "Okay, Steve," he said. "Morlan wins. No more angles for me, for awhile. I got a job."

"Job?"

"Yeah, job. Work. Toil. Sweat. Labor. You know . . ."

"That's swell, Roger." Steve was still trying to get with it. "What doing?"

"Thought I'd try it on the docks awhile. . . . Morlan's right, Steve. I've been sitting around too much. I feel better, just thinking about digging in to it —"

Steve nodded.

They'd eaten, and Steve was back on the couch, still putting pieces together to make a picture when Morlan came. Steve got up and admitted him — Roger was in his room, packing.

Morlan was once more his usual dapper self; and despite his preoccupation, Steve could not resist staring at that beautifully-fitting glossy suit — it was a tweed, again, of different pattern from the first one — and admiring it as much as he did the other.

Morlan was smiling when Steve raised his eyes.

"Last night," he said, in that quietly melodious voice, "your information to me was that Terry might be within tonight."

"No word from him yet," said Steve. "But Ann's fine, though."

"Ann?"

"Terry's girl friend."

"Oh . . . yes. Yes, she would be." Morlan seemed puzzled.

"She went home never knowing what happened. Fit as a fiddle."

"That is presumable. . . . This is not the night for the book?"

Steve's gaze shifted to the little table in the hall. There had been a book there Monday night, the one Roger threw at Morlan. Morlan must have it — but he kept asking about a book.

Morlan made Steve's hesitation easy for him, was talking again. "Tell Terry — tell him there is an urgency. I will come back tomorrow night." He turned toward the door.

Steve said, "I'll tell him — when I see him. . . . About that riddle —"

"Riddle?"

"The one about the twist in the tracks."

Steve thought Morlan was repeating it to himself.

"I have not heard it," Morlan said at length, with a straight face. "How is it said?"

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A doctor as busy as this one seemed to be, as concerned with seeing Terry as he seemed to be, couldn't be expected to remember every little detail, Steve reminded himself. He repeated the riddle.

"Why is a twist in the tracks like the sound of the dawn?"

Morlan repeated it after him, then said: "I will think over it, Steve. Don't inform me of the answer."

Steve could go along with him. "All right," he said. "I won't tell you the answer."

Morlan was halfway through the door when Roger came into the hallway. "Say, Doc," Roger said, "that was good advice. I'm following it — feeling better already."

Morlan smiled at him, uncertainly, and if Steve didn't know better he'd have thought that the dapper man was acting as though he had nothing more than a speaking acquaintance with big Roger. He seemed about to say something, then changed his mind, and was gone.

Roger was frowning, as they went back into the living room; and Steve felt that he was struggling in cloying darkness, though ahead there was a faint glimmer of light.

"Sure a queer duck," Roger said, and went back to his packing.

Steve sat down at the table, pulled over a fresh sheet of paper, and drew two long arrows on it, pointing in opposite directions, like the arrows in the equation for a reversible chemical reaction. He drew cross-bars on them, dividing them into equal sections. Then he numbered those segments, the upper arrow from left to right, the lower from right to left. It helped to put something on paper. He stared at the diagram for long minutes. The light seen dimly through the darkness was getting brighter. Maybe if he talked it out a little, used Roger as a sounding board . . .

"Got a minute, Roger?" he called.

There was a break in the sound of bustling activity from the bedroom. "Got my hands full right now," came the reply. "Be with you in a few minutes."

Steve stared at the gleaming rosy-silver bracelet on his wrist, fingered it.

"How about right now?" he called out.

There was a sound like a bundle of clothing being dumped on the floor, and Roger came out. Steve searched his face, was not surprised to see the same blurry expression he'd noted on Jackman's, earlier that day.

He pointed to a chair. "Sit down," he said. Roger sat down. Steve offered him a cigarette and held a light for him.

Then he asked it. "What do you know about time travel?"

The big man was surprised, and showed it. "Time travel? Nothing, I guess. It'll probably come along like everything else we've read about."

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Which was what Steve *had* been thinking.

"How about Morlan?"

Roger shrugged. "Like I said, he's a queer one," he admitted. "The more I think about him, the more I think he doesn't —"

He broke off suddenly, stared at Steve, took a long drag on the cigarette. Then he said, "What're you getting at?"

"What were you going to say about Morlan?"

Roger rubbed his head. "He doesn't — belong. There's something *different* about him. As though he's — visiting, and doesn't want anyone to think he isn't one of us. But not quite hitting the bullseye. He *looks* different. His face, the way he acts and talks, the way he seems to feel superior to us. And those clothes — he's not wearing clothes. He's wearing a costume."

Steve grunted noncommittally. His sounding board was right up with him.

"And what he did for Ann — things no modern doctor could do, but he did it. With his hands and his mind, mostly. He knows things about the body and what makes it tick that's way ahead, years ahead, centuries, I keep telling myself, of anything the doctors we know about have worked out."

Steve had thought a lot about that, too, this afternoon.

Roger had run out of answers, was asking questions.

"So he's maybe out of the future. That what you're thinking?"

Steve nodded, reluctantly.

"Okay — what's he doing here, *now*, Steve? Tell me that."

"Just what he says: Looking for Terry."

"Why? Terry must be to him what a savage would be to Terry. I don't get it."

"No, Roger. Check our own history. By today's standards, most of the people of the Dark Ages, and earlier, were ignorant, illiterate, hardly better than animals. But they had their Platos, their Aristotles, da Vincis — you could name quite a few that had real brains."

"So Terry's up there with — *them?*"

"Maybe in Morlan's time men will understand a book left to them out of the past, need help from the man who wrote it. Go after him."

"Help for what?"

Steve shook his head. He remembered that first night when he'd mentioned war to Morlan, and how it caught him off guard.

And then Roger was shaking his head too. "We're making a lot of talk, Steve," he said dubiously, "but I don't think we're making much sense. So Morlan's a character. There are lots of characters in the world."

Steve stood up, lit a cigarette, walked to the end of the living room and back, then sat down on the corner of the table, one foot on the floor, the other leg swinging. He puffed silently on his cigarette.

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Finally Steve said, "There isn't any other answer. Look. He's trying to get hold of Terry. Right?"

Roger nodded.

"And he's coming back every twenty-four hours to see if Terry's shown up. Right?"

"Right."

"He came Monday, asked about Ann, had a fight with you, and told me a riddle. He acted like I should know what the riddle was. He came Tuesday, asked about Ann again, and got chased by you because of the fight the night before. Last night, Wednesday, he saved Ann's life; and he told you how to cure your headaches. Tonight he didn't seem to know who Ann was. He acted like we were playing guessing games when I told him how well she was feeling, and when you thanked him for helping you see the light. . . . Tonight I told him the riddle he told me Monday night. One will get you any odds he never heard it before!"

Roger's eyes were slitted in thought. "I'm following you — I think — but it's not doing anything for me."

"No? We see him Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. In that order, of course. He sees us Thursday, Wednesday, Tuesday, Monday. In *that* order."

Roger shifted uneasily in the chair. "That's pretty far-fetched, Steve. I'd like to buy it, but —"

"Why is it? Look, now. He came tonight and I told him a riddle I'll swear he never heard before. He came last night, saved Ann, and told you not to be too mental. He came Tuesday night and asked how Ann was feeling. He ran from you because he thought you were sore over the way he told you about yourself, Wednesday night. He came Monday night, told me a riddle I'd never heard before, and thought you were still after him."

"You make it sound like he's traveling backwards."

"That's just what I mean. He's got the controls of his time machine, or whatever it is, mixed up. He means to come back twenty-four hours later each time. Instead, he's dipping into our time-stream in reverse, twenty-four hours earlier each visit."

Steve stopped talking, ground out the stub of his cigarette in an ash tray. Both men were wordless for awhile. Now and then their eyes would meet, then they'd look away quickly.

The telephone rang. Steve scooped it up. His warehouse was calling, confirming delivery of the tridaptors.

"Any trouble?" he asked.

It was a loud voice on the other end, and the receiver made squawking sounds in his ear. "No delivery trouble, if that's what you mean. Jackman

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was around several times, yelling his head off. Claimed you'd high-pressured him on the deal."

"I'm grieving. . . . He took delivery?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Well . . . thanks." Steve hung up the phone.

He felt he had to do some worrying about the bracelet. Jackman — meekly taking those tridaptors at a price no power on earth could have forced him to pay. And, a little while ago, Roger — dropping everything to come out and talk. It wasn't like him to yield to pressure, either.

High pressure?

Was the bracelet really something more than just a wrist ornament? Deliberately he shut it out of his mind.

"How about some tea, Roger?"

The big man blinked. "You *know* I don't like tea," he grumbled, scowling.

Steve knew that. He said nothing for a few moments, then casually fingered the bracelet with his right hand.

"Did I hear you say you wanted some tea, Roger?"

Roger looked at Steve: that blurry something was on his face. "Yes," he said, "I guess I do, at that."

"You going to make it?"

"Sure." Roger went into the kitchen.

It still didn't mean anything — or did it? No, he couldn't shrug it off that lightly. Assuming Morlan — well, was there anything in logic against the development of a — a persuader-booster? Modern psychology would probably agree to the possibility, at least. Morlan would wear one, on a trip to the past, if they existed in his time.

Roger came in with the tea. Steve sipped his, but Roger's was untouched. He seemed to have forgotten it.

Steve had been turning the situation over in his mind, regarding Morlan and Terry, and he wasn't sure he liked some of the implications.

He said, "Where do we go from here? Morlan's really anxious to contact Terry. He might get in trouble if he keeps on working backwards through time, hit or miss."

"How?"

"Well, I don't know — yet. . . . Why didn't he show up Sunday?"

"I'll bite. Why didn't he?"

Steve slid off the table, started pacing the floor. "That would have been twenty-four hours later than Monday, the way he was headed, the way he's been going."

There was plenty here to worry about. Somehow they had to straighten

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Morlan out, let him know he was going in the wrong direction, start him in the right direction.

Direction?

Steve thought of road maps — time maps.

His sounding board was functioning again. "If he knew your name tonight, Steve, then he's been here before. That must be tomorrow night. We can tip him off then."

Steve made a wry face. This business was hard to keep under control; his brain felt stiff from the strain. Tomorrow night — that was already in the past, for Morlan.

Even so — "Could be you're right. So?"

Roger made a little gesture of finality. "Simple. We tell him to reset his controls to bring him back Saturday night instead of Thursday. Terry and Ann will drop in — they always do on Saturdays. Morlan and Terry get together. That takes care of it."

Steve thought a minute, stopping his pacing, then said, "Okay. Suppose we do straighten him out then. He'd fix things up, like you say. So he wouldn't have come tonight, or last night, or at all before this. He wouldn't be traveling backwards, relative to us. There wouldn't be anything to straighten him out about. We'd never have seen him before. . . . But we've already seen him — therefore we don't tell him tomorrow."

"What's the difference?" objected Roger. "What if he doesn't go backwards, and what if these other visits of his don't happen . . . haven't happened . . . maybe we'd . . . forget —"

The big man was getting a dazed look on his face. Suddenly there was no floor beneath the feet of his argument.

"And what happens to Ann?"

Roger rubbed his head. "She wouldn't get saved, it looks like."

That was the way it looked. They couldn't take a chance on telling Morlan tomorrow night. Still, they had to let the guy know.

Roger's laugh was short and mirthless. "The way I figure it," he muttered, "we have to tell him Monday. *Last* Monday night."

Steve stared at him. "Fine. . . . How?"

"We could give him a note. Tell him not to read it until — until —" Roger's voice trailed off again.

"Until when? We tell him not to open it until last Monday — and we tip him off. If we tell him not to open it until after the fifth time he's been here — how do we know tomorrow night will be his first visit?"

Steve hesitated, gathering his thoughts. He lit another cigarette, then went on. "Besides, we couldn't be sure he wouldn't open it sooner than we tell him to. Or do I mean *later?* Then he might try to straighten things out

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in — *advance*? That would cross Ann up. Her, at least. God only knows what it would do to the rest of us."

Roger had nothing to say. He stared at the carpet. And Steve was out of words, too, though in the back of his mind he was beginning to sniff out an idea.

That was Thursday.

Friday afternoon Terry called to say that he wanted to drop in for a few minutes around 10 that night. Steve felt good about that; things were shaping up — he hoped, he hoped. He called Ann, told her what time to come over.

At precisely 8:30 that evening Morlan came to the door, for the first time. *His* first time, that is, Steve reminded himself.

The same dapper Morlan. Smiling, talking in his high-pitched but definitely melodious voice. He wore a gleaming gabardine suit that seemed to be shot through and through with sparkling pinpoints of light. Steve never was sure just what the base color of that material was. And later, he tried — but failed — to recall whether or not he'd checked to see if Morlan was wearing a bracelet.

Morlan had a copy of the *Daily Herald* under his arm. Steve thought he probably intended it as a souvenir — he'd want lots of things from the past to take back to his own time.

Roger was there, nervous, on edge, smoking one cigarette after another. Steve was keyed up, scared; he admitted it to himself. The wrong word, even a hint that they knew more than they were supposed to know, could really bolix things to a faretheewell. It strained him to the breaking point to maintain a poker face through all of that impossible meeting.

Morlan, gravely suave, introduced himself, and in his precise way explained how important it was to him to get in touch with Terry Adler, author of a profound book on the lacunation of subspace. Despite himself, Steve grinned when Morlan said he'd come a long way to find Terry. He couldn't help thinking that the dapper man had something of a trip ahead of him yet, back through the week.

Steve and Roger introduced themselves. Steve told Morlan he didn't know just when Terry would be back, but they'd be glad to take a message. Maybe if he could stop by next evening —

Just before Morlan took his leave, Steve gave him the note. Morlan, surprised, examined it carefully, while Steve found his eyes constantly straying to that incredibly beautiful suit of clothes.

Morlan's face held the barest suggestion of a frown, and Steve could see that the note wasn't making sense to him. He felt a great lift of relief.

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"It's important," he assured the man from the future. "Vitally important. Don't lose it — hold on to it."

Morlan smiled again, and thrust the note into his pocket, with an air of humoring his host. It didn't matter, though, how he felt, so long as he hung on to the note.

When Steve came back into the living room after seeing Morlan to the door, Roger was reading the paper Morlan had brought with him. Steve glimpsed the headlines:

GRANDSTAND CRASH KILLS 10 AS
BLUE HERITAGE WINS STAKES

A fleeting tracery of something-not-right rippled across his mind as he read the words, then was immediately crowded down by the more important things that worried him.

Once he started to say something to Roger, but the big man was buried in the paper. Steve heard a low whistle from him a few minutes later, the kind he'd put out at the discovery of some good cheesecake. He went back to his worrying. Everything hinged on whether or not Morlan kept the note with him, had it with him at the right moment.

Ann came in about 9:50. Terry was at the door on the stroke of 10.

Terry, somehow, looked a lot different to Steve. He was still slender and dark and taciturn. It was nothing outward, nothing obvious — but somewhere there was change. Steve guessed the change was in himself, really. Like — he eyed Terry speculatively — like the difference between considering a pistol as a club and as a firearm. One way, it looked small and rather insignificant, not too much different from other clubs. The other way, it could look very very big. A lot different from clubs. Yes, the change was in Steve. His viewpoint was changed — had *been* changed. Vastly so.

Ann was feeling fine, so glad to see Terry that Steve thought she must have forgotten the accident entirely. Terry was way up in the clouds from whatever it was he was working on, but genuinely glad to see them all, with a special smile for Ann.

At 10:30 Morlan was back. Steve blinked at the softly brilliant dove-gray flannels he wore — then remembered that during the two hours of *his* time since Morlan's earlier visit that evening, the dapper man had gone back through four days of *his* time. But only two hours ago — Steve gave it up. He invited Morlan in, took the big box he carried and set it beside the hall table.

"Thanks a lot," he said.

Morlan smiled. "It is my thanks to you. Now I have understanding. Our machine is experimental, the first one, built for an urgency —" He shrugged eloquently.

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"There *is* a war?"

Morlan's smile dimmed. "Yes. A totality war, something you could not know. Our winning lies with Terry."

"But — with a civilization as advanced as yours must be . . . what help could Terry be?"

Morlan hesitated. "I don't know if explanation is conveyable to you."

"Maybe I can get the idea if you keep it simple."

Morlan shook his head. "It is not that, exactly. You could paint a picture — a man from your far past would understand?"

"I can't paint, but — yes, a caveman would know about pictures."

"How would you explain a photograph from a camera?"

"Hmmm. That'd be tough — take some time, some doing."

Morlan was smiling again, nodding animatedly. "And now television?"

Steve grinned. "That would stick me — as well as the caveman. . . . I begin to see what you mean."

Morlan said, "That has simplicity."

"You mean — compared to telling me about what's going on? Your problems?"

"Yes. Your — caveman — would have visibility of a result. But comprehension of the theory — you see? . . . I will try for you. You think of people who have life, on worlds which have almost-life, around suns which have —" Morlan spread his hands. "All in space. Space that has cold and not-life and emptiness."

Steve frowned, and said, "Yes, that's about the way I have it pictured."

Suddenly Morlan's steady stare made Steve uneasy, as though someone were creeping up behind him. The Unearthly. The high-pitched voice went on: "Now think of it from the reversal. Think of people and worlds and suns as being comparatively inert. And what you call space as being alive. Resenting *matter*, determined to eliminate it."

"That's —"

"— impossible." The smiling dapper man said it flatly. "For you. Now for resentment substitute war. Space against matter."

Steve laughed, gave it up. "This is where I came in," he said. "I know when to quit. The best I can do is understand that there's war." Then he was thinking of his friend's book — *Lacunation of Subspace through Mental Control of Certain Posited but Unformulated Non-Mechanical Extensions.*

"Terry understands?"

"He understands better than we do. With him, we can win. Without him —" Morlan's shrug was eloquent.

"Okay," Steve said, making up his mind. "I'll buy it. If Terry can help the earth of the future . . ."

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"Earth?" Morlan shook his head. "Earth lost the fight, Steve . . . a long time — ago. . . . And — don't think of me as being entirely — entirely *human*, Steve."

It was shock enough to freeze other ideas simmering in Steve's mind. Then suddenly he was back, remembering Wednesday night, with Morlan working over Ann's body. He was remembering the almost metallic flashings and gleamings of Morlan's nimble fingers. He'd blamed it on eyestrain, then. Now . . .

He gave Morlan a long stare, then turned and led the way into the living room.

He introduced him to Terry and Ann. Morlan went over in the corner with Terry, and they talked in low voices for awhile. Then Terry called Ann over to join them.

Steve, wanting to watch, to catch a word here and there, tried not to. He offered Roger a cigarette, lit one himself. "When are *you* leaving — Monday?" he asked.

Roger looked away. "I had it in mind," he muttered.

"Let's see," Steve mused. "This is the twelfth. Monday will be the —" That wasn't right. He stared at Roger. The big man's face was reddening. "What *is* the date?"

Roger shifted uncomfortably. "It's the eleventh."

Steve glanced quickly around the room, then back to Roger. "That paper — I remember the date on it —"

"It was the twelfth," Roger blurted defiantly. "Tomorrow's paper — today. . . . Morlan *must* have come tomorrow first, his first visit, found nobody home."

"Where is it?"

"Well — I — it never occurred to me . . ."

"Where is it?"

Roger's eyes shifted from side to side. "Okay — I burned it," he admitted.

Steve stared at the big man, not wanting to believe it. Then he said, "Tomorrow's paper. The racing page — the stock market —"

Roger said, lamely, "I'm sorry — I guess I just wasn't thinking. . . ."

They were breaking it up in the corner by now. Terry asked Steve to take care of his things, get rid of them; he wouldn't be needing them any more. He was taking it for granted that his two friends knew what was happening.

Ann was going with them. They were leaving — now.

There were no loose ends. Neither of them had relatives. They shook hands all around, exchanged good wishes, and Roger and Steve kissed Ann.

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There was a smile on her face, but the tears in her eyes made sparkly quotation marks for it.

Morlan was the last one out the door. Steve, remembering, put a hand on his arm.

"About that riddle, Morlan —"

The dapper man's smile vanished. A tingle of color came into his cheeks, then faded. "I don't know, Steve. Not all things . . ." He faltered, started to say something more, didn't say it, then turned again to the door.

Steve kept his hand on Morlan's arm persistently. "Which one of us thought of it first?"

Morlan shook his head.

Steve said, "Okay. Let it go. I'd like to know the answer to it, though. . . . About that paper you had with you — that's tomorrow's paper. It says it rained tomorrow. Will rain. Does that mean it's got to rain?"

Once again the dapper man was at a loss for words. Finally, haltingly, he said, "We don't know. We're just beginning to experiment with Time. . . . We've found it — well, not friendly." He turned, then, and went away.

For long minutes Steve stood in the open doorway, staring into the darkness which had swallowed up Morlan and Ann and Terry, trying to stare into the greater darkness of time — the Future — into which they were plunging. There was a sadness in him at the thought of it, and his shoulders slumped wearily when at last he went back into the house.

Roger's gaze, bright with curiosity, met him. "Okay, chum," the big man said. "What gives? How did you work it?"

"Work what? Oh! Why, just like you said. I told him last Monday."

Roger grunted skeptically.

"Nothing to it," Steve continued. "I remembered about the book you threw at him that night — Morlan caught it and stuck it in his pocket. I wrote a note coded against that book — that's the note I gave him earlier this evening. But it didn't mean anything to him until he got back to Monday night, and had the book so he could look up page numbers and line numbers and words in the lines, to work out the message."

Roger swore in admiration. "Smart," he exclaimed.

"I told him to reverse his time-machine controls for a back-up of four days and two hours, and he'd find Terry."

"Simple — after you explain it. . . . What's in the box?"

"Gifts, I think. I mentioned some other things, in the note." Steve started to open the box, with Roger crouching beside him.

"It could be wrist watches and cameras," Roger said. "And books and coins and pictures. Toys and games. Motion pictures. Samples of the future we'll never live to see."

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Then he cursed bitterly as the box came open. "Plastic clothes!"

"I never thought of anything else," Steve said. "I really admired Morlan's suits."

Roger stood up, flushed, angry. "You — you could have —"

"We're even, Roger," Steve interrupted him, quietly. "I've always wanted to read tomorrow's paper."

The big man's anger drained away. He wiped a suddenly moist forehead. "I didn't want to tell you, Steve. Remember that headline? I read the story. Your name was in the list of casualties when the grandstand collapsed."

They looked at each other, Roger obviously jittery; Steve, for the moment, incredulous. Then he laughed. "That's easy, too," he said. "Tomorrow I'll have a chance not to go to the races. I'll grab it. . . . How about making a pot of coffee before we go to bed?"

Roger hesitated, glanced sideways at Steve, then went slowly to the kitchen. At the kitchen door he hesitated again, pausing, half-turned as though to speak, decided against it, and went to work on the coffee.

That was Friday.

Steve's tongue felt as big and fuzzy as a tennis ball in his mouth when he awakened the next morning. It took him a long time to fight his eyes open, get them focused and registering. He felt sluggish, drowsy. He didn't want to move out of bed, had to struggle to keep from sinking back into slumber.

It was late — the clock said ten minutes after 1 P.M. It had to be — bright sunlight splashed across the floor through the open window and spattered against the legs of the table.

Steve managed to drag himself out of bed, stumble into the bathroom and brush his teeth. That helped a little. He was parched with thirst — he gulped down three glasses of water before he began to come a little alive.

Back in the bedroom, he shed his pajamas and reached for the clothes on the chair beside the bed. Then he stared in astonishment. The chair was empty. He closed his eyes, trying to remember where he'd undressed last night. No good — it wouldn't come. But he always undressed right there by the bed, always hung his clothes on the chair.

But with a head like this — had he tied one on and forgotten all about it? And the way a neat man, drunk, may scatter his clothes, had he gone and hung them all up properly in the closet?

He fumbled at the closet knob. Everything was wrong this morning — and then he realized that the closet was locked. Locked, and the key gone.

Steve was puzzled. He wanted an answer — but first of all he wanted

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a pair of pants. He was not conditioned to nudism, even in privacy. Well, for a Saturday around the house, a pair of Roger's slacks would do, even if they'd fit him like the bags on a burlesque comic —

Roger wasn't in his room. Neither was the key to Roger's locked closet.

Suddenly grim, alarmed, Steve searched the house. No Roger anywhere. No pants. And no money. The household cache was gone, and of course Steve's wallet had been in his missing trousers. Roger — money —

Blue Heritage! The Stakes!

That, thought Steve bitterly, was a reformation that died pretty quickly. But who could expect even the Marvelous Mr. Morlan to turn Roger into a stable character for more than twenty-four hours?

Not stable, maybe, but pretty smart. Not wishing to harm Steve, just dropping a couple of sleeping pills in his coffee and making sure that nakedness would imprison him more effectively than handcuffs —

Only Roger had forgotten something. Steve swore at himself and his doped brain that had taken vital minutes to remember it. Morlan's parting gift —

His hands were shaking as he pulled on the plastic suit. It flowed around him, warmly, caressingly, fitting as nothing made by the tailors he knew could ever fit. Even in this moment of dire urgency he had to spare a second to admire his raiment.

His trembling hands rattled the doorknob as he let himself out the front door. He *knew* — and the race was due to start in less than twenty minutes. When the nags rounded into the stretch . . . and the crowd stood up . . .

Only one corner of his mind said it could not be real. Then, running across the grass, he slipped, in the wetness of it. The sprinkler was broken. It *had* rained that morning!

That was the clincher!

He flagged down a cab, jumped in, said, "Fairmont Park — fast!" Then thought: *no money*. There'd be a delay while he wrangled with the cabbie.

He felt for the bracelet. It was still there. Leaning forward in the seat, he shouted, "Deadhead this one!"

The driver, still staring at the suit from which he'd not taken his eyes since Steve leaped into the cab, got that queer blurry expression on his face.

"Okay, Chief," he said.

They made the run with the flag up.

People were massed around the grounds — and cars: official cars; ambulances; two fire trucks standing by.

Steve walked around a little, listened, without really hearing, to the breathless statements of stunned survivors. . . .

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Extras were being hawked on the streets as he started home. He bought one, but didn't really need to look at it; he knew his name was in the list. There'd been more than money in his stolen wallet — all his identification . . .

He didn't really blame Roger. A chance to make a killing . . . a killing —

His cab stopped at the house. Same driver, flag still up. The cabbie stared at Steve's suit as he got out.

Steve left the paper behind him in the cab. He hadn't really wanted it, after all.

He walked part way up the walk, stood gazing at the emptiness of the house. He could feel the same emptiness beginning to seep into him.

Where was Roger — now?

And Terry and Ann — Steve looked into the blueness of the sky above, tried to imagine the farness of time aligning with the farness of space.

Space against matter — would Terry be the turning point? Win the war?

Would they ever feel like visiting — a trip to his time? Could they come back? How — not-friendly — was Time?

At last he shrugged, tried to shake off the gloom, taking slow steps toward the house. Not really wanting to go in —

Things happen, he mused, pensively. Things change.

And that — was that.

Note:

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It's a pleasant relief to turn occasionally from the grandeur and arrogance of most spaceflight fiction to the simplicity and humility of the stories of Zenna Henderson. Here is a tender and touching encounter between a man of God and one of his most spatially remote brothers — with results surprising and disturbing to both.

Food to All Flesh

by ZENNA HENDERSON

> O give thanks unto the Lord . . . who giveth food to all flesh: for his mercy endureth forever.
>
> Psalm *136*

PADRE MANUEL sighed with pleasure as he stepped into the heavy shade of the salt cedars. It was a welcome relief from the downpouring sun that drenched the whole valley and seemed today to press down especially hard on the little adobe church and its cluster of smaller buildings. Padre Manuel sighed again with regret that they could manage so little greenery around the church, but it was above the irrigation canal, huddled against the foot of the bleak Estrellas.

But it was pleasant here in the shade at the foot of the alfalfa field and, across the pasture, was the old fig tree with the mourning dove nest that Padre Manuel had been watching.

Well! Padre Manuel let the leaves conceal the nest again. Two eggs now! And soon the little birds — little live things. How long did it take? He sat down in the grass at the foot of the hill, grateful for this leisure time. He opened his breviary, his lips moving silently as the pages turned.

And so it was that Padre Manuel was in the south pasture when the thing came down. It sagged and rippled as if it were made of something soft instead of metal as you'd expect a spaceship to be. Because that's what Padre Manuel, after his first blank amazement, figured it must be.

It didn't act like a spaceship, though. At least not like the ones that were in the comics that Sor Concepción brought, clucking disapprovingly, to him when she confiscated them from the big boys who found them

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so much more interesting than the catechism class on drowsy summer afternoons. There was no burned grass, no big noise, none of the signs of radiation that made the comic pages so vivid that, most regrettably, Padre Manuel usually managed a quick read-through before restoring them at the day's end. The thing just fluttered on the grass and scooted ahead of a gust of wind until it came up against a tree.

Padre Manuel waited to see what would happen. That was his way. If anything new came along, he'd sit for a while, figuring it all out — but slowly, carefully — and usually he came out right. This time, when he had finished thinking it over, he got a thrill up and down his back, knowing that God had seen fit to let him be the first man on earth to see a spaceship land. At least the first to land in this quiet oasis of cottonwood and salt cedar held in a fold of the desert.

Well, after nothing happened for a long time, he decided he'd go over and get a closer look at the ship. Apparently it wasn't going to do anything more at the moment.

There weren't any doors or windows or peepholes. The thing was bigger than you'd think, standing back from it. Padre Manuel figured it might be 30 feet through, and it looked rather like a wine-colored balloon except that it flattened where it touched the ground, like a low tire. He leaned a hand against it and it had a give to it and a feeling that was like nothing he ever felt before. It even had a smell — a pretty good smell — and Padre Manuel was about to lick it to see if it tasted as good as it smelled, when it opened a hole. One minute no hole. Next minute a little tiny hole, opening bigger and bigger like a round mouth without lips. Nothing swung back or folded up. The ball just opened a hole, about a yard across.

Padre Manuel's heart jumped and he crossed himself swiftly, but when nothing else happened, he edged over to the hole, wondering if he dared stick his head in and take a look. But then he had a sort of vision of the hole shutting again with his head in there and all at once his Adam's apple felt too tight and he swallowed hard.

Then a head stuck out through the hole and Padre Manuel got almost dizzy, thinking about being the first man on earth to see something alive from another world. Then he blinked and squared his shoulders and took stock of what it was that he was seeing for the first time.

It was a head all right, about as big as his, only with the hair tight and fuzzy. It looked as if it had been shaved into patterns though it could have grown that way. And there were two eyes that looked like nice round gray eyes until they blinked, and then — *¡Madre de Dios!* — the lids slid over from the outside edges towards the nose and flipped back again like a sliding door. And the nose was a nose, only with stuff growing in the

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nostrils that was tight and fuzzy like the hair. It was hard to see how the thing could breathe through it.

Then the mouth. Padre Manuel felt creepy when he looked at the mouth. There was no particular reason why, though. It was just a mouth with the eyeteeth lapped sharply over the bottom lip. He'd seen people like that in his time, though maybe not quite so long in the tooth.

Padre Manuel smiled at the creature and almost dodged when it smiled back, because those teeth looked as if they jumped right out at him, white and shiny.

"*Buenos días*," said Padre Manuel.

"*Buenos días*," said the creature, like an echo.

"Hello," said Padre Manuel, almost exhausting his English.

"Hello," said the creature, like an echo.

Then the conversation lagged. After a while Padre Manuel said, "Won't you get out and stay for a while?" He waved his hand and stepped back.

Well, the space man slid his eyelids a couple of times, then the hole got bigger downwards and he got out and got out and got out.

Padre Manuel backed away pretty fast when all that long longness crawled out of the hole, but he came back wide-eyed when the space creature began to push himself together, shorter and shorter and ended up about a head taller than Padre Manuel and about twice as big around. He was almost man-looking except that his hands were round pad things with a row of fingers clear around them that he could put out or pull in when he wanted to. His hide was stretchy-looking and beautifully striped, silver and black. All tight together the way he was now, it was mostly black with silver flashing when he moved and he had funny looking knobs hanging along his ribs, but all in all he wasn't anything to put fear into anyone.

Padre Manuel wished he could talk with the creature, to make him welcome to this world, but words seemed to make only echoes. He fingered his breviary, then on impulse, handed it to the creature. The creature turned it over in his silvery tipped hands. It flared open at one of the well worn pages and the creature ran a finger over the print. Then he flipped the book shut. He ran his finger over the cross on the cover and then he reached over and lifted the heavy crucifix that swung from Padre Manuel's waist. He traced its shape with his fingertip and then the cross on the book. He smiled at Padre Manuel and gave the book back to him.

Padre Manuel was as pleased as if he'd spoken to him. The creature was a noticing thing anyway. He ran his own hand over the book, feeling with a warm glow (which he hoped was not too much of pride) that he had the only breviary in the whole world that had been handled by someone from another world.

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The space creature had reached inside the ship and now he handed Padre Manuel a stack of metallic disks, fastened together near the top. Each disk was covered with raised marks that tried to speak to Padre Manuel's fingertips like writing for the blind. And some of the disks had raised pictures of strange wheels and machinery-looking things.

Padre Manuel found one that looked like the ship. He touched the ship and then the disk. He smiled at the creature and pushed the plates back together and returned them to the creature. *He* was a noticing thing too.

The space creature ran his fingers lightly down Padre Manuel's face and smiled. Padre Manuel thought with immense gratification, "He likes me!"

The creature turned from Padre Manuel, lifted his face, his nose flaring, and waddled on short, heavy legs over to a greasewood bush and took a bite, his two long teeth flashing white in the sun. He chewed — leaves, stems, and all — and swallowed. He squatted down and kind of sat without bending, and waited.

Padre Manuel sat, too. Then the creature unswallowed. Just opened his mouth and out came the bite of greasewood, chewed up and wet. Well, he went from tree to tree and bush to bush and tried the same thing and unswallowed every mouthful. He even tried a mouthful of Johnson grass, but nothing stayed down.

By this time, Padre Manuel had figured out that the poor creature must be hungry. Often on these walks to the pasture, he would take an apple or some crackers or something else to eat that he could have offered him, but it so happened that this time he had nothing to offer. He was feeling sorry when the creature shrugged himself so the knobs on his ribs waggled, and turned back to the ship, scratching as though the knobs itched him. He crawled back into the ship.

Padre Manuel went over cautiously, and almost got a look inside, but the creature's face, teeth and all, pushed out of the hole right at him. Padre Manuel backed away and the creature climbed out with a big box thing under his arm. He scoonched himself all up together again and put the box down. He motioned Padre Manuel to come closer and pointed at one side of the box and said something that ended questiony. Padre Manuel looked at the box. There was a hole in the top and some glittery stuff on the side of it just above a big slot and the glittery stuff was broken. Only a few little pieces were hanging by reddish wire things.

Padre Manuel shook his head.

"What is it for?" he asked, making his voice as questiony as he could.

The creature looked at him and slid his eyelids a couple of times, then he picked up a branch of greasewood and pushed it in the top of the box.

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Then he waggled one hand in the slot and stuck a few of his fingers in his mouth. Padre Manuel considered for a moment. It must be that the box was some kind of food-making thing that had broken. That was why the poor creature was acting so hungry. *¡Qué lástima!* To come so far, from Heaven alone could tell which of God's worlds, and to arrive hungry and to stay unfed!

"I'll get you something to eat, my son," said Padre Manuel. "You wait here." And he hurried away, cutting across the corner of the alfalfa field in his hurry, his cassock whispering through the purply blue flowers.

He was afraid someone might start asking questions and he wasn't one to talk much about what he was doing until it was done, but Sor Concepción and Sor Esperanza had taken the old buckboard and driven over to Gastelum's to see if Chenchita would like to take a job at the Dude Ranch during the vacation that had just begun. She had graduated from the tiny school at the mission and something had to be found to occupy her time which she was all too willing to devote to the boys. Padre Manuel sighed and laid the note aside. God be thanked that this offer of a job had come just now. The Gastelums could use the money and Chenchita would have a chance to see that there was something more in the world than the pimply, levi'd, snickering boys who lounged against the hitching rail in front of the church after Mass every Sunday.

Padre Manuel raided the kitchen and filled a box with all kinds of things and went back out to the pasture.

Well, the creature tried everything. Most of it he unswallowed almost as soon as it went down. Padre Manuel thought they had it for sure when he tried the pork roast, but just as they were heaving a sigh of relief, up it came — all that beautiful roast, mustard and all. The creature must have been pretty upset, because he grabbed Padre Manuel and shook him, yelling something at him. Padre Manuel recoiled, but his hand went to the band of tight fingers that circled his arm. He laid his hand upon the cool smoothness of the fingers.

"My child!" he rebuked. "My son!" He looked up into the blazing silvery gray of the eyes above him. In the tight silence that followed, Padre Manuel realized, with a pleasurable pang, that he had touched a creature from another world. Then he was rubbing his arm that still tingled from the grasp.

The creature stepped back and looked at Padre Manuel. Then he picked up a pinch of dirt and sprinkled it on his head and smiled.

Padre Manuel bowed gravely. Then he, too, smiled.

It was almost dark before Padre Manuel gave up going around the pasture with the creature, trying to find something he could stomach. He

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was careful to avoid the tree where the dove's nest was. Surely if the creature couldn't eat the egg from the kitchen, he wouldn't be able to eat a dove's egg. Still, if worst came to worst — He sighed and started home.

Gonzales' bull was stretching his neck through the barb-wire fence, trying to reach the lush green alfalfa just beyond his tongue's reach.

"You tell Nacio to plant his own alfalfa," said Padre Manuel. "And don't break the fence down again. To die of bloat is unpleasant and besides, there is a hungry thing in the pasture tonight."

He glanced back across the field. The trees hid the ship from here. Good. It was pleasant to have a little secret for a while. Then he began to worry about the creature. This matter was too big to keep to himself too long. It might be very important to others. Maybe the sheriff should be told. Maybe even the government. And the scientists. They would go mad over a ship and a creature from another world. There was Professor Whiting at the Dude Ranch. True, he was an archeologist. He looked for Indian ruins and people long dead, but he would know names. He would know whom to tell and what to do. But unless Padre Manuel found something that the creature could eat, it would be a dead creature long before letters could go and come. But what was it to be?

The matter was in his prayers that night and after he turned out the light, he stood at the window and looked up at the stars. He knew nothing of them except that they were far, far, but perhaps one of those he could see was the creature's home. He wondered what God's name was, in that world.

Next morning, as soon as Mass was over, Padre Manuel started out to the pasture again. He was carrying a bushel basket full of all kinds of things that might perhaps be eatable for the creature. There were two bars of soap and a sack of sugar. A length of mesquite wood and a half dozen tortillas. There were four dried chili peppers and a bouquet of paper roses. There were two candles that regrettably had been left in the sun and were now flat dusty curlicues. There was a little bit of most anything Padre Manuel could think of, including half a can of Prince Albert and a pair of canvas gloves. A tin cup rattled against a canteen of water on top of the load. Irrigation wasn't due in the pasture for three days yet and the ditch was dry.

Padre Manuel was just fastening the pasture gate when he heard a terrible bellering, and there was Gonzales' bull, the meanest one in the valley, running like a deer and bellering every time he hit the ground.

"The fence!" gasped Padre Manuel. "He broke in again!"

Behind the bull came the space creature, his short, stubby legs running

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like the wind. But the wildest, most astonishing thing was how the rest of him came. His legs were running all the time, but the rest of him would shoot out like a rattler striking, flashing silver lightning in the sun, and then he'd have to wait for his short legs to catch up. It reminded Padre Manuel a little of an inch worm, only different.

Well, the bull and the creature went out of sight around the salt cedars and there was one last beller and then lots of silence. Padre Manuel hurried as fast as he could, with the basket bumping him every step, and there, right in front of the spaceship, was the bull, very dead, with its neck folded back and a big hole torn in its flank.

Padre Manuel was slow to anger, but he felt his temper beginning to rise. To destroy the property of others! And Gonzales could so little afford — But he didn't say anything. He looked around quickly while he waited for the creature to make a move. He could see all kinds of unswallowed stuff around the ship. Stuff that probably had been a rabbit and a gopher and an owl and even a bull snake. Then the poor thing gave a groan and unswallowed the piece of bull he had eaten.

"*Buenos días,*" said the creature.

"*Buenos días,*" said Padre Manuel.

"Hello," said the creature.

"Hello," said Padre Manuel, then he uncapped the canteen and poured out a cup of water. He held it out to the creature, thinking, as the cup was taken, "A cup of cold water in Thy Name," and blinked as the creature lifted the cup and emptied it on his head, his hide fairly crawling up to meet the water. Padre Manuel filled the cup again and again until the canteen was empty, reproaching himself for not having thought of water the night before. The creature's hide rippled luxuriously as Padre Manuel laid the empty canteen aside and indicated the basket he'd put down by the ship.

The creature looked at it hopelessly and went back, with sagging shoulders, to the ship. He reached inside and lifted out something and held it out to Padre Manuel. The Padre took it — and almost dropped it when he saw what it was. It was another space creature, no bigger than a kitten, mewling and pushing its nose against Padre Manuel's thumb.

"*¡Madre de Dios!*" gasped Padre Manuel. "A little one! A baby! Where —?" He turned in astonishment to the space creature. The creature ran his hand down his ribs and Padre Manuel saw that all the waggly knobs were gone. The creature reached into the ship again and brought out two more of the little creatures. He held one of them up to a round silver spot on his ribs.

Padre Manuel stared at the creature and then at the kitteny thing.

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"Why, why!" he said, wide-eyed with amazement, "Why Señora, Señora!" And he could hear some more mewling coming from the ship.

Well, the space *lady* put down the little ones and so did the Padre and they crawled around on their hands and feet, stretching and pushing together for all the world like little inch worms, taking bites of anything they could find. But everything unswallowed almost as fast as it swallowed.

The space lady was going through the bushel basket, biting and waiting and unswallowing. Pretty soon she'd tried everything in the basket, and she and Padre Manuel sat there looking kind of hopeless at all the unswallowed stuff. Padre Manuel was feeling especially bad about the little kitten things. They were so little, and so hungry.

He picked one up in his hand and patted its nudging little head with his finger. "*Pobrecito*," he said. "Poor little one . . ."

Then he let out a yell and dropped the thing. The space lady snarled.

"It bit me!" gasped Padre Manuel. "It took a chunk right out of me!"

He pulled out his bandana and tried to tie it over the bleeding place on the ball of his thumb.

All at once he was conscious of a big silence and he looked at the space lady. She was looking down at the little space creature. It was curling up in her hand like a kitten and purring to itself. Its little silver tongue came out and licked around happily and it went to sleep. Fed.

Padre Manuel stared hard. It hadn't unswallowed! It had eaten a chunk of him and hadn't unswallowed! He looked up at the space lady. She stared back. Her eyes slid shut a couple of times. In the quiet you could hear the other little ones mewling. She put the space kitten down.

Padre Manuel stood, one hand clasped over the crude bandage, his eyes dark and questioning in his quiet face. The space lady started towards him, her many-fingered hands reaching. They closed around his arms, above his elbows. Padre Manuel looked up into the silver gray eyes, long, long, and then closed his eyes against the nearness.

Suddenly the fingers were gone. Padre Manuel's eyes opened. He saw the space creature scoop up her little ones, the quiet one, the crying ones and hurry them into the spaceship. She slid in after them and the hole began to close. Padre Manuel caught a last glimpse of silver and black and a last glint of the white pointed teeth and the hole was closed.

He watched the wine-colored ship dwindle away above the Estrellas until it was gone, back into space. He waved his hand at the empty sky. "*Vaya con Dios*," he said. "Go with God."

Then he sighed and picked up the canteen and cup and put them into the basket. He shooed away the flies that swarmed around him and, lifting the basket, started back across the pasture.

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Comes now yet another deed of mercy by Dr. Aesop Abercrombie, that kindly author of good cheer and wise counsel for the bewildered and sorely distraught. The good doctor's internationally syndicated column is a special source of comfort to those perplexed by too-sharp variations from the accepted norm. You will recall that the last recipient of his benevolence (F&SF, April, 1953) was a young man with a tail. Now he brings succor to Mrs. Bender of Gopher Corners, Montana, a simple lady in a most complex mess.

Night Life

by ESTHER CARLSON

A WOMAN in the prime of life stood near a dusty mailbox on a dusty road, looking to the distance as far as eye could see.

Her name was Belle Bender and she was waiting for the postman's Ford with a beating heart, for she had written to Dr. Aesop Abercrombie, that kindly old syndicated family doctor, and was expecting his answer in this week's Gopher Corners *Gopher-Herald.*

The postman came, deposited the lone paper, and wheezed away in a lonesome cloud of dust. Belle ran down the wheel tracks toward her home.

She opened the paper on the back porch next to the cream separator. With moist eyes she read her own letter in print:

Dear Dr. Abercrombie:

My husband talks in his sleep. At first it was only grunts and groans but now it is all kinds of sounds, like two stations mixed up on the radio. If he don't talk, he snores. I love my husband but it is driving me crazy. Is there any way I can stop my husband from this habit?

Tired Wife

Below, Dr. Abercrombie shed his ink of mercy upon her problem:

Dear Tired Wife:

Talking in one's sleep may be the vocalization or expression of one's true self, to which the world has denied admittance. Do you know your husband's inner self, his hopes and his dreams? Have you, too, shut him out? I advise listening carefully, my dear woman, to what your husband

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is striving to tell you from his subconscious. Help him along if necessary. Ask him fond questions. Get to know his fine spirit. Once this is done, then use your womanly ingenuity to solve his problem, and your own, for you will find that when you have aided him, your own trouble will disappear. His snoring will not bother you if you just go to sleep and forget about it.

All Best Results,
Dr. Aesop Abercrombie

Now under Belle Bender's eyes were bags as big as 40-watt bulbs, and the circles around her eyes resembled tricycle tires. Her shoulders sagged, her back caved in, and her knees creaked when she walked. After she read the letter she clutched the paper to her breast.

"Is it true?" she whispered. "Have I failed Big Bill?"

But immediately some measure of courage and hope returned, and vowing to rectify her omissions, she went about her day's work of plowing the east field, milking cows, slopping pigs, weeding vegetables and preparing supper, with a lighter step. At 9 o'clock that night when Big Bill showed up from town where he had gone to buy shoe laces, she was already in bed, wide awake and waiting for his nocturnal speech.

As before, the room was wrapped in silence for a while; then, beginning slowly, from the deep interior of Big Bill, commenced a program of rumbles, snorts, hisses, sighs, murmurings, gaspings and a moaning not to be gainsaid. Belle lay inert and tense, her eyes on the shadowy outlines of the highboy in the corner from which hung one leg of a union suit, ghostly and white. The noise gained in momentum, isolated syllables broke through.

"Say something, Big Bill," she whispered.

"What?" he said, like his mouth was full of a feather pillow.

"Are you trying to tell me something, Big Bill?"

"Quit calling me Big Bill," said the voice, and her husband began to snore.

This last remark caused Belle Bender to muse far into the night in an effort to extract from it his problem. What had his inner self been trying to tell her? Near cockcrow she thought she had the answer.

After feeding the chickens, hitching the team and completing her other housewifely tasks, she called Big Bill down from his bed to a fine breakfast of salt pork and sprouts.

"Morning, *William*," she said.

He cracked her in the jaw. "What's the matter with yah," he roared, "trying to get smart or something? Call me by my right name — Big Bill!"

With that he put on his Sunday clothes, laid clean newspapers on the

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buckboard seat and galloped off for town to pick up some oddments he needed.

The day being the day for butchering hogs, Belle Bender tied an apron round her neck, set the vat to steaming, and sharpened two dozen knives on the grindstone near the hen jail.

It was a bloody job and not one to Belle's liking. She thought with longing of her dear old mother and how she wished the good-hearted, talkative old lady were with her now to help. She thought, too, of Big Bill's folks; how they invited her to stay, but kicked him out from bed and board with the cruel words, "lazy bum." They had not understood. They had not tried to find his inner self.

In the afternoon, Belle dug potatoes and did the chores and hastily tidied herself into a clean apron in case Big Bill should return unexpectedly early. He did not, however, and so, after re-reading Dr. Abercrombie's inspirational letter, Belle put a lamp in the window and clambered up the stairs.

About 9 o'clock Big Bill drove in from town and soon joined her in the big oak bed. Belle had to keep pinching herself to stay awake during the interval of silence that always preceded his seizures. Tonight, mixed in with the usual noises, Belle distinctly heard a rip which caused her to sit bolt upright on the straw mattress with the belief that her husband's "hopes and dreams" were breaking through.

"Lay down," said Big Bill, like his mouth was full of a chicken.

"I thought you was asleep, Big Bill," Belle apologized in a low tone.

"Stop calling me Big Bill," said the voice.

"If I don't you'll smack me," Belle said with justice.

"I'd never strike a lady," said the voice, sounding somewhat injured. "They are members of the fairer, weaker sex."

"I declare," said Belle Bender, all in a muddle, "I don't know what you're talking about, Big . . ."

Just then interference broke the connection and syllables were drowned in snores, and though Belle remained awake the rest of the night pondering upon the strangeness of the subconscious mind and listening for more words, none were forthcoming.

Big Bill opined in the morning that he hadn't slept worth an obscenity last night and demanded a breakfast of pork chops and beet greens with fries on the side. This he ate, bemoaning the while the absence of apple pie.

"I'll make you a nice big pie for supper, Big Bill," Belle said, then flinched. "You want to be called Big Bill, Big Bill?"

His neck grew purple and his face colored up like a Persian rug. "Of COURSE I want to be called Big Bill, woman. That's my name!"

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As he climbed aboard the wagon to go to town and order a new pair of work pants from Montgomery Ward, Belle leaned against the barn door and held her poor head in her hands.

How could she help him in his trouble?

She canned tomatoes that day; they were fully ripe and bursting with the sun. Four hundred and twelve quarts with two left over for nibbling at. She made two apple pies, crusty, tart-sweet, gold on top. She lugged the water from the well and washed clothes down by the cottonwood tree where there was a bit of grass around. In the last rinse water she got in herself and scrubbed up a mite and wondered in this leisure moment upon the mysteries of man.

If, she mused . . . if Big Bill had called another name in his sleep, a woman's name not Belle Bender, then she'd know what to do. If he had muttered curses upon heaven and foul slanders on mankind, she'd know what to do. If a name, a deed, a face, had come from the past to plague him, she'd know what to do: shoot the other woman, call in the preacher, or move to Chicago.

What unbeknownst in him wasn't Big Bill?

Have you, too, shut him out? Her conscience prickled.

Clamp-jawed, steelshot-eyed, she took to bed shortly before 9 o'clock in a clean nightdress of faded blue.

Big Bill stomped up the stairs at precisely on the hour, got into his nightshirt with a good deal of cussing on the way, and presently was asleep. A dry wind rattled across the prairie causing the dust to beat against the house and the cottonwood to moan. These, added to Big Bill's sound effects, made quite a melee. And underneath it all, a voice, she sensed, was calling. . . .

Suddenly it was startlingly clear: "Raise you two."

Silence.

"Another two."

Silence.

"Make it twenty." Then with a snicker of glee: "Full house, aces high."

"Hello," said Belle tentatively.

"Greetings, Ma'am," said the voice pleasantly.

"What you dreaming about, Big Bill?"

He hesitated. "Please don't call me Big Bill. Call me Forsythe Follansbee."

"Goodness!" Belle said, in spite of herself, "that don't sound like Big Bill."

"I don't have the pleasure of knowing the gentleman," said the voice.

This one Belle couldn't answer. The voice was a nice one though, and

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it was really nice to talk to somebody. It got kind of lonesome on the farm sometimes. She was glad she'd put on her blue nightie.

Get Acquainted, Dr. Abercrombie had said.

"Where you from?" she inquired in her best visiting manner.

"Out yonder," said the voice. "Draw three."

"Mind me being here?"

"No Ma'am! Always glad to have pretty lady luck over my shoulder."

"I declare," said Belle, thrilled to her toes for the first time in seventeen years of married life.

But the dry thunder clapped outside and the heat lightning flashed and Big Bill began to snore as was his wont, rendering further conversation impossible.

When Big Bill, in foul distemper, ranted, raved and roared next morning about how little work she had accomplished on the harvesting, Belle Bender listened closely. Yes, the voice was the same, only the voice of the sleep talker was more refined, more gay dog, more of what she had hoped from Big Bill that long ago wedding day. She smiled softly to herself and got a clout on the head for it.

With a borrowed reaper she got in the hay that day, pausing only for swigs of spring water from a glass jar. Underneath she felt all good and eager for night to come when Big Bill and Forsythe would return from town where they had gone for chewing tobacco.

During the next week she had to sit up nights with a sick cow, and acutely missed her nightly chat with her husband's subconscious. She did not feel she was being unfaithful to the Big Bill she had always known. After all, she reasoned, she had married all of him, inside and out.

Forsythe and Belle worked through the formalities of acquaintanceship. "Lucky Lass" he called her now, and quite affectionately, and one night he had four flushes in a row which he kindly attributed to her presence. For Forsythe Follansbee was a gambling man, and had a way with women, too. The winter wheat was in; the grain gone to market; the mortgage interest paid. The snows came in great ten foot drifts and Belle Bender shoveled the path to the barn and cleared the road for Big Bill's urgent trips to town.

Spring came damply, and an accident happened. Big Bill broke his leg while reaching for a jam jar in an upper cupboard and had to stay home about the house. Belle sheared the sheep, tended to the lambing, sowed alfalfa, wheat, oats and flax, plowed, harrowed and painted the barn.

Big Bill sat on the back porch near the cream separator with his leg in a fat white cast and hated everything fiercely. But when he dozed in the mild spring sunshine, Forsythe, he of the dulcet tones and way with cards and

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women, returned. These afternoons proved the happiest periods of Belle Bender's life up to now, for in his upright sleep, Big Bill did not snore and Forsythe came through without interruption.

Sometimes while Big Bill nodded in the rocking chair, Belle carried him, chair and all, out to the barn, and while she repaired the tractor his true self kept her good company through the lonely hours.

But bones will mend. Life progresses. When the wild strawberries were at shortcake stage, Big Bill stood, stretched, cussed and ordered the team hitched for town.

The farm, with the dusty sky bowl over it, the weeds and soaring grasshoppers, was a mighty desolate place then for Belle Bender. True, at night Forsythe returned, but oh, so briefly squeezed between silence and the snore. Life itself became dusty and dried out for the awakened female.

And word reached Belle over the party line that Big Bill was allowing as how he might go down to Minneapolis on a shopping trip when the crops were in.

One evening in midsummer before the late dusk came on, Belle, chancing to leaf through the family Bible, came across the withered newspaper clipping which contained Dr. Abercrombie's earnest advice. Squinting in the violet light Belle re-read the wonderful phrases. She had followed it to the letter . . . listening, helping, asking fondly . . . but wait a minute, had she, in all honesty, used her woman's ingenuity?

On the afternoon of July 25, Belle Bender, in fresh calico and sun bonnet, walked seven miles into town. She crossed the railroad tracks and climbed the curbing of Main street. She walked directly by the livery stable where Big Bill sat with his cronies drinking ginger beer, and entered the general store.

"Afternoon, Belle Bender," said the prop., a tall cadaver in a dirty white undershirt. "What will it be?"

Belle Bender laid her egg money on the counter.

"Give me," she said, "a gross of sleeping pills."

Now it happened that in the spring of the following year, Dr. Aesop Abercrombie had occasion to travel by train to Vancouver, B. C., on certain business, and it also happened that when the train stopped in a small Montana hamlet for water, he noted on the station the name of Gopher Corners.

The name blazed in his phenomenal memory like a movie marquee: BELLE BENDER IN GOPHER CORNERS.

In high excitement he inquired of the conductor, was there time . . .? And the conductor nodded. A vehicle stopped at the crossing could be hired.

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So it was that the venerable physician approached a square wood farm house with a budding cottonwood tree and found a woman on a tractor with a sidecar attached, preparing to go into the fields.

"Belle Bender!" he cried. "I have come a long way. Tell me quickly, are you happy? Is your problem solved?"

Belle Bender looked down at the sidecar in which sat a sleeping man. She smiled tenderly without speaking.

The good doctor beamed upon the happy couple and raised his fine white hand in benediction.

Once again his healing touch had worked its wonder.

A Lady's Privilege

As the club crashed down I doubted
That the fate was worse than death.
"I changed my mind!" I shouted
With my strangulated breath.
By a Fiend I met destruction
And as driven snow I died.
Laws of Nature we must follow;
I became transmogrified.

I awakened from the pure faint
When the angel choir keened:
"Hallelujah, maiden saint,
Here we take no wives or rings."
It's two hours of instruction
Before I win my wings,
And as soon as I can solo
I'll fly back to find the Fiend!

WINONA McCLINTIC

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Robert Moore Williams has been writing science fiction for over fifteen years and, as we told him recently, a story by the author of the classic Robot's Return *has been long overdue in this magazine. Thank goodness, we (and you) can complain no longer of such a lack. Here, Mr. Williams forsakes his pet theme of robotics for the moment and gives us a brief interlude on Mars, wherein the dynamic clash of two cultures reveals both a past and a future.*

Aurochs Came Walking

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

SQUATTING BESIDE the machine, John Carnovan shifted his weight from one foot to the other, hoping he would be more comfortable that way. He wasn't. As if they had a will of their own, his eyes kept turning in their sockets toward the metal blade resting on its point on the stone floor within a foot of him. The blade was made of the ancient tough metal of Mars, the secret of which had been long lost. Carnovan's eyes followed up the blade to the face of old Mallar, who stood leaning on the sword and looking down. The human hastily took his eyes away from Mallar's face. He did not like what he saw there.

Tiernden, his Martian friend and fellow worker here, squatted beside him. The witch doctor, Kelgar, squatted on the other side of Tiernden, asking questions. The witch doctor looked like a crow, yellow eyes and all, an impression that was heightened by the black robe that he wore. The yellow crow eyes rarely left the crystal ball which Kelgar cuddled in both hands. The witch doctor seemed to be drawing information from the crystal, or to be pretending that he was, but whatever was the source of his information, the questions that he asked were shrewd.

Too shrewd, Carnovan thought, too calculating, too far-reaching in their implications.

Carnovan decided that maybe he detested Mallar and Mallar's six-foot sword less than he detested Kelgar and the witch doctor's crystal ball. He knew he hated both of them, but maybe he hated Kelgar the most, because the witch doctor was shrewder, and therefore more dangerous.

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"You and the earthman have been here twice ten-times-ten-suns," Kelgar said accusingly.

"Two hundred days," Tiernden answered. The little Martian shivered as he spoke and his skin shifted its hue, taking on the color of old copper. A sort of Brownian movement seemed to be visible on the surface of the skin cells. "Yes, Holy One. That is about right."

"You and the earthman have made progress?"

"Certainly, Holy One." With the machine there in front of his eyes, Tiernden could not deny that they had made progress. "But—"

A growl sounded from Mallar. "Get to the point. Is the machine finished?"

Tiernden started to speak. As if he wanted to make certain that all reports passed through him, the witch doctor spoke first. "It is not yet decided, Great One."

Listening, Carnovan thought: "They call Kelgar Holy One and Mallar Great One. Yet Kelgar is what we would call a witch doctor and Mallar is the head man of a tribe of nomadic desert dwellers. There is no holiness in the witch doctor and no greatness in the chieftain."

Once there had been greatness on Mars. From this ruined citadel, from this very room, from this machine, that greatness had flowed outward. Mars had been ruled from here, ruled wisely and benevolently. Now a desert chieftain and his medicine man were asking questions of the two scientists who sought to revive that ancient rule, that long-lost benevolence.

Unease came up inside Carnovan as he sensed the reason for the sudden appearance here of Mallar and his tribe, and of Kelgar.

"What does your magic ball say?" Mallar asked Kelgar.

"It does not answer yet, Great One."

"What does *he* say?" The sword blade came up to point at Tiernden.

"I have been trying to say," Tiernden said, dignity in his voice, "that progress has assuredly been made. But we do not have the whole answer yet, nor the whole machine. A piece, a part, is missing."

"Um. What part?"

"It is hard to say exactly, Great One."

"Huh!" Mallar's eyes came to Carnovan. There was no liking of this earthman in them, or of any Terrestrial. The eyes said that Terrestrials were a race that had come across space, disturbing the old Martian ways, and that it would be better for all concerned if they returned into space from which they had come. "What does the earthman say, about the great machine, and the great power, and about progress?"

Carnovan rose to his feet. Even if he was willing to answer this question, he wondered how he could possibly answer it in terms that Mallar could understand. His grasp of Martian was adequate but neither in Martian

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nor in English were there any words to describe this machine and the way it operated. In fact, Carnovan always hesitated before calling this device a machine — it had no mechanical moving parts. Inside of it, in a complex of crystal filters and tiny force fields, changes took place, energy was generated and flowed — elsewhere. Any device which generated or moved energy could be called a machine. But the energy generated here was of a most subtle kind. What kind it was neither Carnovan nor Tiernden had been able to establish. The *great power*, the old records called it. Perhaps the best that could be said in words was that the machine generated electricity *plus*. Plus what? This was one of the unanswered questions.

How could he explain this machine to a barbarian when he did not fully understand it himself?

But if Mallar really wanted to know if they had made progress, the machine itself was certainly evidence of that. At least, it was evidence of uncounted hours of patient toil. Once a machine like this had existed on this spot. When Carnovan and Tiernden had started work, only the foundation of the machine had been there, the hole in the rock where it had rested. The parts of the original machine had been scavenged by metal-hungry desert nomads generations ago.

Tiernden and he had translated the ancient records of the builders of the machine, puzzling out the hieroglyphics on the walls, following the directions of the long gone engineers. Thus they had slowly rebuilt the machine . . . all but one part of it.

All of this passed through Carnovan's mind in a split second. His eyes went to the walls of the room. The hieroglyphics they had translated covered most of these walls, carved there by a race that had once lived on this planet, had known greatness, and had gone to dust.

Carnovan's mind flicked back to Earth, to drawings he had once seen on the wall of a cave in southern France, deer, horses, aurochs. Long centuries in the past dawn men on Earth had carved those pictures on that cave wall, thinking that thus they exercised some control over the animals themselves, hoping that because they drew the picture of an aurochs on the wall of a cave, a live aurochs might be thus lured into the traps laid by the hunters.

This magic had been a dream of dawn men. It had failed. Dawn oxen had not walked into the traps laid by the hunters because artists — or were they early scientists? — had sketched a picture of the animal on the wall of a cave. No doubt the dawn magicians had found excuses for their failure. Perhaps the incantations had not been exactly right, perhaps some witch had interfered.

Carnovan's eyes went to the last wall in the big room. This wall was of smooth black stone, a natural blackboard. A scrawl of chalk marks showed

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there, his handiwork, mathematical equations, the symbol of summation, Greek letters, the square root of minus one. These chalk marks were actually a mathematical development that went beyond Riemann, and described a non-Euclidian, non-Riemann universe. The equations went forward, then backtracked upon themselves, describing an involved concurrent relationship of matter and force, a progressing unity that seemed to create itself as it advanced.

Carnovan's handiwork! A glow came up in him at the thought. Actually the equations were a translation into human mathematics of the Martian wall hieroglyphics. They were a mathematical description of the recreated machine.

Were they also animals scratched on a cave wall?

Carnovan did not know, as yet. He suspected, or hoped, they were more than that. The glow in him grew stronger. He thought: *This is the record of my passage through the Laboratory. I, man! Here on this wall I have scrawled the notes of my discoveries made during my passage through this matrix of suns, stars, and men, mathematical equations, the laws of resonance, some of the laws of that strange configuration of energy called matter. I have dug them out of the Laboratory as I passed through it and I have written them on this cave wall so that your knowledge shall be greater and your passage through the Laboratory shall be facilitated, made more easy.*

What is the Laboratory? Yonder Earth, these planets, this solar system, this galaxy, this universe!

This dream of facilitating the passage of men — and Martians — through what he called the Laboratory had brought Carnovan to Mars, to this ruined, rocky citadel.

The growl in Mallar's voice jerked Carnovan back to the present. Carnovan pointed to the hieroglyphics. "We have translated these. This one accomplishment is a monumental achievement."

Carnovan pointed to his own figures on the wall. Because of the job he had done here, both Terrestrials and Martians might in the long run find life a little finer, a little fuller, a little better.

When the great power flowed again! Again the sense of achievement came up in him. He told Mallar what the figures meant.

The chieftain grunted, a sound that said, "Nuts!" in Martian as clearly as it would in English. Carnovan tried to suppress his anger. Again unease was strong within him. The room was still. Behind Mallar his two guards stood with drawn swords. Squatting beside the machine, both Tiernden and the witch doctor seemed to have lost the ability to move.

Carnovan sensed the will to power in Mallar, the will to rule, to dominate. A kind of sickness came up in him. He turned, moved toward the window.

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As he moved one of Mallar's guards swung to face him, sword point up, but dropped the blade at a grunt from the chieftain. Mallar turned his attention to Tiernden again. Carnovan stood by the window, looking past the ledge outside it, down at the plain below.

Five hundred feet below the ledge, the ocher-colored plains of Mars began, stretches of sand broken by clumps of flowering shrubs. The plain below was dotted with tents now, the hide structures in which Mallar and his tribe lived. Dothars, the camels of Mars, ranged far and near, eating the flowering shrubs.

"They arrived without being expected or wanted," Carnovan thought sourly. "And he brought his whole bunch with him."

Then he saw that the whole tribe had not been brought. Worry moved as a fret through him. He looked again, to make sure.

"No females, no children, only warriors."

Behind him, Tiernden's apologetic voice was trying to describe why the machine was unfinished.

"So far as we know now, it can never be finished," Tiernden said. "A vital part is missing —" His voice said that he hoped if he said this long enough, it might be believed.

"He lies!" the witch doctor shouted. Carnovan spun from the window.

The witch doctor had risen to his feet. His finger pointed at Tiernden. Hard, grunted, guttural sounds poured from him, forming a reverberating harshness that filled the room.

"But, Holy One —"

"He lies!" Kelgar repeated. "The great power flows again. The great generator is finished."

"Is a space ship finished when it has no steering jets?" Carnovan said. "Anyhow what makes you think it is finished?"

"My magic ball says it. The great power flows again."

"Nuts!" Carnovan said, in English.

"My magic ball never lies! It says the great power flows again. Therefore the great power does flow."

"Ho!" The single word came from Mallar, a burst of triumphant sound. "Then it is real, Kelgar, as you prophesied?" Mallar did not doubt the magic ball of his witch doctor.

The witch doctor looked like a crow that had found a dead rabbit and was preparing to feast. "It is real, Great One."

"Ho! Does your magic ball say that I will have the great power?"

The witch doctor looked like a crow caught eating a dead rabbit by a hated and feared eagle in the sky. He glanced at his chief, then hastily turned his gaze back to the ball.

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"It says you are the far-removed son of the great ones. It says the power will flow for you, and was destined for you."

"Ho!" The blast of sound from Mallar's lips was pure triumph. "With the great power, I shall rule all Mars!" The sword blade made a whistling triumphant circle in the air. "Then, earthman —"

John Carnovan tried to pretend he did not hear the words.

Now, he saw why he and Tiernden had been allowed to come here by Mallar. Other humans in the past had sought access to this spot and had been denied. Mallar, or more likely, Kelgar, had sensed that at last the right human and the right Martian had arrived to rebuild this machine. Mallar had let them come, hoping they would discover again the lost secret of the great power. So he could grab it!

Carnovan felt sickness in him as he realized what had happened and what would happen. In the Laboratory, there was no excuse for one man to have dominion over other men. He stepped forward.

"It is a true thing," he said. "I don't know how Kelgar got the answer — he must have guessed it — but he got it right."

"My magic ball is always right," Kelgar said.

Carnovan ignored him. "The machine has been rebuilt. I admit it. The great power flows again."

Mallar and his witch doctor looked like two crows with a dead rabbit big enough for both of them.

"But the control of the machine is missing. Without the control, the machine is worthless, like a wild dothar without a rider, like a space ship without steering jets."

The point of Mallar's sword came up.

Tiernden spoke quickly. "Without him, you will never know how the machine may be controlled. If a new control is to be built, he is the only one who can build it."

"It has been some time since my warriors have dragged a living body behind a dothar and enjoyed themselves spearing the body."

"It may be that you will pay a high price for your warriors' fun."

Mallar glowered, undecided.

"Show us the place where the missing control is supposed to go," Kelgar ordered. "I mean, with the permission of the Great One, of course."

"Well — " Mallar was still relishing the thought of spitting the human on the blade.

"We need to know more," the witch doctor urged.

"Consult your crystal ball," Carnovan said.

"Please!" Tiernden spoke in English. "There are easier ways to die than by being dragged behind a wild dothar."

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For a moment, it looked as if Kelgar was about to incite Mallar to use his sword on this heretical earthling.

"I will show you where the control is supposed to go," Tiernden said hastily.

With obvious reluctance, Mallar and the witch doctor turned their attention back to the machine. One of the guards watched Carnovan with anticipatory relish.

"Here is the crux of the device," Tiernden said. He pointed to a birdcage helix of bus bars that led upward from the machine, circled a slab of stone with a depression in the middle of it, and returned to the machine below. The control had rested in the depression in the stone slab. Obviously, it had been an induction device of some kind. The flow of energy through the control had directed the flow of energy within the machine, modulating and changing it. Tiernden burst into a torrent of Martian, trying to explain the concept of induction currents to two tribesmen who did not even know the meaning of electricity. Mallar listened with growing impatience, the medicine man with keen interest, his eyes constantly going back to the crystal he held in his hand.

"Then build a new control!" Mallar snorted.

"But, Great One — we cannot."

"Why not? You rebuilt this." Mallar's sword gashed the tough shielding of the machine.

"We do not know how to rebuild the control. The records are missing." Tierden gestured toward the wall.

The hieroglyphics were carved on black basalt panels set into the wall. One panel was missing. It had been pried from its place by some tribesman hunting for treasure. The remnants of it were fragments of broken black stone upon the floor. They had already gathered them together and had tried restoration, a hopeless task.

"Fool! The-dothar waits — for you instead of for the human!" Mallar's sword came up.

Tiernden's chin came up with the sword. "Destroy me if you will. I have told you the truth."

Mallar turned to Kelgar. "What says the magic ball — is this the truth?"

"Yes, Great One, it is true." Kelgar's voice was suddenly sharp with excitement. "At least, it is partly true. The control, the real original control, has not been destroyed. It still exists, but is lost."

"What?" Carnovan gasped. This idea had not occurred to him.

Kelgar's voice grew sharper still. "It is here, somewhere. It is here in these ruins, lost."

"Kelgar —" Mallar's voice was hard.

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"So speaks my magic ball," Kelgar answered.

"Where is it hidden?"

"My magic ball does not say. But — your warriors could find a lizard lost in a sandstorm. Call them. Have them search the ruins here."

Mallar grunted to a guard. The Martian departed on the run.

"How will they, or you, know the control when they find it?" Carnovan asked. "They don't even know what it looks like."

"They will find it," Kelgar answered. "You will know what it is." Something close to a grin showed on the crow face.

Almost immediately tall, copper-skinned Martians were in the big room. Mallar gave them their orders. The whole interior of this mountain was honeycombed with passages, tunnels, and rooms, constructed by the gone Martian race that had reached for greatness, had grasped it in what they called the great power, and then had lost it — or had let it go.

Sounds of furious search came from the vast ruin as Mallar's warriors went about their task. Tiernden stood close to Carnovan and moaned softly at what his people had done and were doing. There was agony in the little Martian. He had dreamed that the golden age of Mars might come again. He had even studied the wisdom of Earth in the hope of restoring the ancient wisdom of Mars. Now he was watching his dream vanish in the grasping ambition of a barbarian chief.

Carnovan's eyes flicked across the wall where his equations were, the mathematical development which described the progressing unity that constantly fed back upon itself and created itself as it moved forward.

If only the aurochs would come alive!

Warriors were coming into the room, bringing with them the results of their search. They brought bits of corroded metal, a long-lost tool, a wheel that had once been part of some machine, fragments that had escaped other metal-hungry raiders across the centuries. At the sight of each fragment, Tiernden and Carnovan shook their heads.

Each time they shook their heads, Mallar's face grew harder.

Across the room, Kelgar kept his eyes on the magic ball, apparently to see if they were lying. Carnovan walked over and silently stood beside the witch doctor. Looking down at the crystal ball, the human stood transfixed.

In the depths of the crystal, an object was actually moving. It seemed to be swimming there, coming into clarity, moving up from vast depths to the surface. Carnovan recognized the moving object.

An aurochs!

The sight startled John Carnovan to the bottom of his being. He was a scientist, he lived in a universe of cause and effect. Aurochs simply did not move in magic crystal balls on Mars.

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Carnovan looked again. The creature *was* moving, walking upward with short steps as if climbing an invisible hill. The horns and the hump were there. It was an aurochs seen in a crystal ball on Mars.

"What is that thing?" Carnovan whispered.

"It is a dothar flying," the witch doctor answered, without lifting his eyes.

"That? That is no dothar —"

"It is a dothar. Do you think I do not know a dothar when I see one —" Kelgar's eyes came up. He had been in a semitrance state and he had not realized he was speaking to this Terrestrial. Anger spurted to the surface of his face.

"Go away, fool!" His upflung hand caught Carnovan across the mouth.

The earthman tasted the saltiness of blood as his lips were crushed against his teeth. Anger came up in him too. He caught it, held it beneath the surface. This was no time for anger.

"I'm curious about the crystal," he said, politely.

"This is not for earth eyes." Kelgar's face was a mask of suppressed rage and open suspicion. The crystal was his source of power. His hand went to the dagger at his belt.

"Oh, well —" Carnovan shrugged and moved away. The witch doctor's crow eyes followed him across the room, then went back to the magic ball.

To the depths of his soul, Carnovan was shaken.

"An aurochs was actually visible in that ball!" he whispered to Tiernden.

The little Martian had other and more important matters on his mind. But he was polite. "An aurochs? I do not understand."

"An Earth beast."

"On Mars?"

"Yes. That's the part I can't understand at all." A thought came up inside Carnovan. He tried to shrug it aside, then expressed it in words. "Maybe it was the dream of an aurochs."

"An Earth beast dreaming in Kelgar's magic ball?"

"No. A man dreaming — of an aurochs." Even to Carnovan the words sounded silly. "But Kelgar saw a flying dothar."

The voice of Kelgar was suddenly loud in the room. "The control we seek exists."

"You said that before," Carnovan said.

"But this time my magic ball says more. It says that one is here who knows where the control is hidden."

A rumble sounded deep in Mallar's throat. "Which one knows?"

The witch doctor's finger pointed at Carnovan. "That one. The earthman knows."

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"What? But I *don't* know."

"He lies."

"But I tell you —"

"You look at death, Terrestrial," Mallar spoke. "Where is that control? You have built it, then hidden it. Now you are trying to pretend it does not exist."

Carnovan shrugged. "The answer is obvious, Great One. Your witch doctor lies. I offended him and this is his way of trying to gain revenge."

"Wh —" Mallar's voice was a wordless growl.

"I do not lie! Look!" Kelgar was so enraged he extended the crystal.

Carnovan glanced at it. His own face was visible there. It seemed to him that a tiny John Carnovan was rising out of those crystal depths, swimming toward the surface as the aurochs had seemed to climb an invisible hill.

"See!" the witch doctor shrilled. "Your face shows in my magic ball. It means you know where the control is hidden."

"It may have some meaning but it does not have that meaning. I do not know —"

Mallar growled to the guards. Tiernden screamed as Carnovan turned. The two guards had seized the little Martian.

"What's the meaning of this?" Carnovan demanded.

"Come and see the meaning," Mallar answered. "Come to the window and watch."

The two guards carried the twisting but helpless Tiernden from the room. They appeared on the plain below, still carrying him. Shouting, they gestured to the other warriors there. The scene was like the telescreen projection of a play. Carnovan saw the dothar brought, a half-wild animal that kicked and bit. A leather thong was tied to the saddle, then to Tiernden's legs. The savages pushed him and he fell, to lie on the sand with his face down, making no effort to resist. Warriors ran to saddle their own dothars, then waited in the saddle, with spears uplifted, looking expectantly toward the window above them.

"When I signal from the window they will loose the dothar," Mallar said.

"I see," Carnovan said. Utter pain was in him, anguish as deep as space, as high as the sky. Sweat covered him now, pouring out faster than even this dry air could suck it up. The bitter wind from the plains of Mars seemed to sweep through him, cutting him to the bone without drying the sweat that drenched him.

"Where is that control?" Mallar said. The glow on his face said there was something about this situation that pleased him down inside.

Again the anguish surged through John Carnovan. A sudden spurting

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clarity of mind followed it. In that clarity, as clearly as he had seen the aurochs walking, he saw the answer, sensed the answer, fitted the fact of the aurochs walking into the vast equation that operated here.

He knew where the control was hidden.

When he had put together those symbols on the blackboard, he had set up thought processes deep within him, configurations in his cortex that had sent out signals fainter than whispers on the other side of Mars — and louder than a thunder clap in the room, if you knew how to hear them. These signals from the configurations in his own cortex had resonated with — something. His cortex had been the transmitter, something else had been the receiver — the control.

The aurochs that had walked in a dream — or was it a prayer — in his mind, had also walked in — the control.

Tension made Carnovan laugh as he saw the answer. He couldn't help it, even though he knew the problem was not yet solved, only sharpened. It was all so ridiculously simple, if you understood it, and so ridiculously complex, if you did not.

Long ago, perhaps, when the collapse of the great race was just beginning, some marauder had stolen the control from the machine. The crystal ball had passed from hand to hand, stolen and re-stolen. Some remote Kelgar had discovered its power to generate visions and so it had generated another kind of power . . . the power to defraud, to rule by falsehood and illusion.

Or had that theft, a random act, marked the downfall of the race? Perhaps, from that moment on, they had been unable to control their mighty machine. Carnovan dismissed that idea. Those who could build one such crystal, could build another. No, the theft had occurred long after *they* were gone. . . .

"You laugh, earthman!" Mallar moved toward the window.

"Yes. I know what the control is. I know where it is."

"Tell!"

"The magic ball of your holy one. That is the lost control."

Mallar turned back, staring at his witch doctor.

Kelgar's face showed shock. And fear. His magic ball was his one weapon . . . and his one shield. It brought him tribute from the whole tribe, even from Mallar. And if the Terrestrial told the truth, Kelgar would not have to consult his sacred crystal to foresee just what was going to happen.

"He lies! Because I tried to gain revenge on him for casting doubt on my magic ball, he now seeks vengeance on me by saying that my magic ball is the lost control of the machine. Great One, we have been together many years. We know each other, we trust each other —"

"Yes, I know you," Mallar said. The tone of his voice said that perhaps

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he knew this witch doctor too well. He looked at Carnovan. "What foolishness is this? Kelgar got his magic ball from the witch doctor before him, slew him for it, in fact!"

"Kelgar's magic ball is the original control," Carnovan answered. He was on very thin ice here and he knew it. "See this round depression here on the black stone slab under the rounded bars. The crystal once rested here. The great power was controlled by it. Perhaps your witch doctor knew this all the time."

Mallar looked a long time at the depression. His eyes came up to Kelgar. Words muttered deep in his throat but they were inarticulate sounds. Kelgar lifted himself to his full height. In one hand he clutched the crystal, in the other a dagger.

"I made you great," he said to Mallar. "I can take your greatness away."

Mallar's muttered sounds still did not make words.

"Are you afraid of your own witch doctor?" Carnovan said.

Mallar took a step forward, away from the window toward Kelgar. Then he stopped. Rage and fear flickered alternately across his face.

"I'll talk to him, if you're afraid," and Carnovan walked briskly across the room to stand face to face with the witch doctor.

"Do you want to see a dothar flying?" Carnovan said softly.

"What insane talk —"

"Insane? You talked it first."

"But it was in my magic ball. Many strange sights are to be seen there."

"Including the sight of a holy one being stabbed in the back one dark night?"

Kelgar's crow eyes flicked toward Mallar, brooding by the window.

"Give me the magic ball." Carnovan held out his hand.

"Never," Kelgar shrilled.

"Keep your voice low, old man. Or shall I tell Mallar that you have known all along that your crystal controls the flow of the mighty power? Shall I tell him that you plan and have always planned to use it all yourself?"

Kelgar's eyes blazed with hate but he spoke quietly.

"We will test to see if my magic ball is the control. But I will place it in the machine myself."

"Go right ahead. But first, tell me, do you know the meaning of the secret writing there?" Carnovan pointed toward his equations.

"Those foolish marks —"

"The point you have missed, and Mallar has missed, is that those marks are a secret writing. You have to know how to read them to know how to make the crystal control the machine."

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Kelgar did not believe him. Carnovan leaned closer, whispering now. "Old man! I know. He who helps me today rules Mars tomorrow. He who stands against me today will never live to see tomorrow. Mallar no longer trusts you."

"He fears me!"

"Once he feared you. Now he hates you."

Kelgar shuddered.

"If you play the game right, it may be that you and I will rule Mars. If you play it wrong, you will rot in the desert — and Mallar and I will rule Mars. Make your choice."

Greed came up in Kelgar. The crow talon came impulsively out to Carnovan. The big crystal dropped into the man's hands. It was soaked with sweat.

"If you betray me — this —" The other talon clutched the dagger.

Carnovan moved swiftly to the machine. "The Holy One has seen the light of reason," he called to Mallar.

"You had better see it also," the chieftain said. He came to the machine, stood by Carnovan, sword raised. As Carnovan slipped the big crystal into the depression under the bus bars, they stood behind him, one with a naked sword, the other with a dagger.

"They'll eat this rabbit, hide and all," the earthman thought. He forced such thinking out of his mind. As he slipped the crystal into place, a warmth touched his hands, caressing them. It was a gentle warmth but a feeling of vast power was in it.

"Now that I've got it, how do I actually work this thing?" he thought. His eyes went up to the wall where his equations were, to the laws of resonance as he had arranged them where he felt they belonged. He formed a picture inside his mind — and focused his gaze on the crystal.

In the crystal, the aurochs walked again, moving on short legs up a steep hill. Behind him, he heard Kelgar catch his breath and he knew the witch doctor was also seeing a picture there.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"I do not know. I have never seen this beast before."

Carnovan made a small sound, a whisper of understanding.

He felt full control of his mind, that rare ability to channel thought that comes only in the stress of utter concentration. But now there was no stress. Easily, carefully, he turned his thought into another channel, sent it, so to speak, down another path. And the machine responded as he had expected it would.

Under his hands, wholly obedient to his will, flowed the surge of a power that had never been known on Terra — at least during the recorded history

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he knew. Perhaps an occasional mystic had hinted at it, perhaps some scientists, thinking beyond the actions and reactions of matter, had seen its dim outlines but no one, no man of *earth*, had ever found the means and method of its regulation.

"Stand a little farther back," Carnovan said. He sensed rather than saw the two take a step away from him. He extended and focused his thought. The thought was of Tiernden, down on the sands below.

"Well, earthman?" Mallar growled behind him. So far as they could determine, nothing was happening.

"In one moment —"

From the distance came sudden cries of alarm. Then came bellowing noises. They grew in volume.

"Look at the window, Mallar," Carnovan said.

The chieftain turned to the opening. His jaw dropped, his eyes bulged. What his thoughts were Carnovan did not know, but they must have been horrible things.

"A dothar, flying!" Mallar screamed.

The dothar was not flying. It floated there beyond the window, a great ungainly beast, all flopping ears and flailing legs attempting to find a footing in thin air. Its harsh screams were a continuous blast of sound. Floating with it, held to it by a leather thong, was Tiernden.

Mallar turned, sword lifted.

Carnovan took his hands from the crystal ball, let them drop to his sides. His mind still focused on the dothar and the dothar still floated in the air, Tiernden level with it at the end of his tether. Carnovan sighed with relief and turned his attention to the menace of the barbarians.

"Use the sword wisely, Great One." He smiled at Mallar. "It was your Holy One who foresaw that this would happen."

Mallar lunged, but not at Carnovan. The point of the blade went into Kelgar's midriff, through and out behind his back.

Kelgar shoved himself forward on the sword. The dagger struck. The point went into Mallar's throat. The chieftain clawed at it, pulled it free. Blood spurted and he made a gurgling noise.

They went down together.

Carnovan looked down on them without compassion, without hate. In the great Laboratory of man's progress there simply was no place for such as they.

Sandals rasped on the stone floor. Carnovan turned. The guards were lunging toward the door. They were brave enough, tough enough, but they, too, had seen a dothar flying.

Carnovan turned his attention to the window. The dothar and Tiernden

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still hung in mid-air. Carnovan focused his thought, channeled it. He had a momentary impression of *something* flowing through the window. Outside, a heavy leather thong snapped like a thread. As it snapped, the dothar began to fall. It dropped out of sight, screaming. Its screams ended suddenly in a crashing thump. Then Carnovan heard other sounds: yells, the clatter of gear as Martians struggled to mount stampeding dothars, failed, then ran as best they could . . . away.

Carnovan listened. Yet, as he listened, and contemplated the rout below, he noted that a section of his mind was working with the machine. Tiernden floated to the window, grasped the ledge, couldn't keep a grip and drifted on into the room. He settled to the floor.

"Sorry." Carnovan bent to help him. "I meant to let go at the window. My control isn't precisely worked out yet."

Tiernden stared at the crystal ball, resting in its appointed place.

"So," he whispered. "All the time . . ."

The Terrestrial nodded.

"An aurochs is walking. It has come down off the cave wall, out of the secret writing. . . ."

"I don't understand," said Tiernden.

Carnovan put his hands on the crystal sphere and began his explanation.

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Others may sing of the Fount of Hippocrene, which welled forth from a hoof-print of Pegasus; but to Jerome Barry the true spring of the Muses is the American soda fountain. Throughout Mr. Barry's attractive slick fiction and his delightful and too-little-known detective novels runs the soda fountain theme; even his detective (in MURDER WITH YOUR MALTED *and the intricately ingenious* LEOPARD CAT'S CRADLE*) is a drugstore soda jerk. The soda fountain is to Mr. Barry as much the focus of human problems as Gavagan's Bar is to Messrs. de Camp and Pratt; and it was inevitable that there should appear at last a Barry fantasy which could happen no place on earth save among the malts and the splits and the sundaes.*

The Milk of Paradise

by JEROME BARRY

HE CAME DOWN the street out of the darkness between the widely spaced lamp posts, as if emerging from nowhere, and entered the pool of light that shone on the sidewalk from the windows of the drugstore.

The warm, damp gale that whooped down out of the overcast sky seemed to hustle him along until it suddenly slackened and left him standing beneath the neon sign that creaked in complaint against the pummeling of the wind. The sidewalk, still black-wet from the recent rain, was streaked with wavering crimson by the glowing tubes overhead.

He could see, behind the display of vitamin pills and first-aid kits, the hunched forms of a young man and a girl at the soda counter; but they were too frowningly intent upon some private difficulty to glance through the window toward him. He set down a small suitcase, fumbled in a pocket for a memorandum book, worn and dog-eared, and thumbed through it.

"Las Animas, Colorado . . . West Helena, Arkansas . . . Opelike, Alabama . . . Brother, how I do get around. . . . Old Orchard Beach . . . Sparrows Point . . . Hmmm . . . Here we are! Highland Springs." He glanced up at the glowing red tubes and read the legend they spelled out.

Drugs — COOPER — Soda

He looked at the window again as if for something that should be there and wasn't, and his brisk certainty seemed to falter. His gaze lifted to the

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upper darkness. "This is the place, isn't it?" he said aloud, and seemed to listen for an answer.

There was a wink of lightning, and then distant thunder cleared its throat softly all around the horizon.

He nodded, snapped the little book shut and stood waiting patiently until a gray-haired man reached between the window displays and tilted a hand-lettered cardboard against the pane. It read: SODA MAN WANTED.

The stranger outside picked up his suitcase and entered the store. Following the gray-haired man back toward the prescription department, he passed the couple at the soda counter and caught the murmur of their voices.

". . . want to forget I ever met you, Dave Leonard," the girl said in a whisper of agony.

The boy beside her, a dark, good-looking lad with a hint of desperate recklessness in the cant of his head and the slant of his broad shoulders, said numbly, "Aw, Louise . . . what does that leave me?"

"What you had before you killed her . . . and that was bad enough."

The boy's chin went to his chest, as if she had laid her knuckles across his mouth.

Then the overheard snatch of conversation was left behind, and the gray-haired man reached the prescription counter and turned and saw the newcomer.

"Can I help you?"

"I saw your sign in the window, Mr. Cooper."

"Well, I dad! I just put it there. . . . What's your name, son?"

"Harry."

"Harry what?"

"Harry Farr."

"Local boy? Don't think I've seen you before."

"No. I was hitchhiking through."

The old man sighed and looked Harry Farr over. This was the type, all right. Sandy hair, rumpled with the wind. A beaten-up old raincoat and a scuffed cardboard valise that probably had nothing in it but a spare shirt and a change of underwear and socks. And the face — always the same, whether it was dark or fair, handsome or ugly — the pert, restless, worldly wise, young-old face of the itinerant soda man. Mr. Cooper had seen so many of them. Flip, disillusioned, and yet hungry with something boyish and unfulfilled that drove them on and on, from town to town.

"Where you come from, Harry?"

"Louisville, last."

"Long way off. You been around, I guess."

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"Plenty."

"This ain't a big-town store, Harry, with tips and all that. I pay the regular wages, and that's about all you can count on. How long you figger to stay here?"

"As long as I'm needed, Mr. Cooper."

"Well, I dad!" the druggist said. "That's a new wrinkle. Most o' you boys only think about what you'll get out of it yourselves." He peered through thick lenses. "You look like you had something solid underneath, son, instead of a wisecrack today and gone tomorrow. . . . Long as you're needed, eh? I need someone, all right. Gettin' too stiff in the joints to be all over the store at once whenever the latest high school boy throws down his apron and quits. . . . You know your trade, Harry?"

"You heard of Joe Di Maggio?"

"Seen him on television, son."

The corners of Harry Farr's wide mouth tucked themselves into his cheeks, and his puckish eyes crinkled. "When it comes to mixing fountain drinks, that's who I am."

Mr. Cooper grunted. "You won't die o' gallopin' modesty, boy. Nor o' shortness o' breath. . . . Got a place to stay tonight?"

Harry nodded. "Where's an apron and cap? I'll start now."

Mr. Cooper frowned. "Business is slow tonight, account o' the storm. Get settled where you're goin' to room and start work tomorrow. We got quite a lunch trade from the Standard Silverware factory downstreet."

"I'll start now," Harry said again. For a second there seemed to be an air of quiet authority about him, then he grinned and stripped off the tired old raincoat with a playful twirl. "Gotta get on the payroll right away, chief."

Mr. Cooper rubbed one ear and thought of the lunch rush tomorrow. "I wouldn't be chinchy about a few hours o' pay. Go ahead."

Harry walked along past the grill and the sirup pumps, a crisply laundered cap cocked over one eyebrow, removed two empty glasses and wiped the dark plastic of the counter. "Anything else?"

The girl raised anguished eyes and shook her head. All but a few strands of her deep-gold hair were hidden by a dark kerchief. Her cloth coat was buttoned closely. Her clothes seemed only a somber frame for a face like that of a grieving young madonna.

The boy beside her motioned Harry away. His head went closer to hers. He muttered, "I'll promise anything, Louise. Anything."

"You promised before."

"Isn't there anything I can do to make you believe me?"

"Oh, Dave, don't you see? It isn't that I don't want to. Wanting hasn't anything to do with it."

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His strong young body rocked slowly from side to side on the stool, like a wild animal fretting behind bars. His voice was hoarse and low. "Then I might as well let everything go to hell. So those guys are hot-rod fools and maybe worse. Some of them are on the heist, I guess. I listened to you. They were the only friends I had, but I was ready to give them up for you." The tormented swaying of his body made the heavy thing in the side pocket of his coat bump against his hipbone. He held himself rigid.

"Give them up?" The girl made a despairing sound. "You said you would. But you didn't."

"That one night. Just to tell them good-by. They were guys I'd gone around with. We'd been together."

She said in a stiff-lipped whisper, "My baby and I had been together for three years."

His breath made a quick inward sibilance, as if she had knifed him.

Mr. Cooper rubbed his spectacles with a cleansing tissue, looking comfortably toward his retreat in the prescription department. "Guess I'll read a little, Harry. The wife bought me a set o' classics for a birthday present — must be nine years ago. I never did get to look into 'em before. We always had somethin' to do together. But now it's kind o' lonely, and I been workin' through 'em, volume at a time."

"I'll watch the counter, chief," Harry said. "Go on and read."

"You know the stuff the kids around here order? Know a steamboat?"

"Sure. Five scoops of ice cream in a row, all different flavors. On top you put —"

"Okay. . . . Steamboats are kind of old hat. Know any new wrinkle, Harry? Anything the kids might go for?"

The soda man's face twisted into a pert smile on the side nearest Mr. Cooper. The other side remained still and grave. "I've got a specialty."

"What's it like?"

"I call it the Milk of Paradise."

"Good name. Sort of a milk shake?"

"Sort of."

"What's in it? . . . Wait now. The Milk of Paradise. Seems to me I read a poem — about two volumes back. 'For he of somethin'-or-other has eaten —' "

" 'For he on honeydew hath fed,' " Harry said quietly, " 'and drunk the milk of Paradise.' "

"That's it! Coleridge. Right? Poem about Kubla Khan and the pleasure dome. I remember now. You know, Harry, I've often tried to figure what he meant. What did the milk of Paradise do to the feller in the poem? Now, I thought at first maybe it got him all excited. Gave him a big lift —

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ecstasy — terrific kick. But as I keep gettin' older and lonelier I think different."

"How?"

"Well, people have always dreamed about some marvelous drink or food. Do you know what it was supposed to do, most of the time? Just make 'em forget their grief. There was the water of the river Lethe. The Greeks thought that when you drank it you would forget all your past troubles. And there was nepenthe. That was supposed to be an Egyptian magic drink that wiped out all your memories of sorrow. People have always imagined there might be something like that. But not like any of the drugs we have."

"No," Harry said. "Dope won't do. It's been tried."

"Your old troubles come back worse than ever — and a lot o' new ones with 'em. I think the thing the poets wrote about — nepenthe or the milk of Paradise or whatever — was a beneficial gift from the gods. It would take away the painful memories without puttin' anything bad in their place. It would give a man peace when the grief was too great for him to bear. That's just my idea."

"It might be a good idea," Harry said. "Sometimes. For some people. Not always."

Mr. Cooper sighed. "I often wish I had some stuff back there in the jars that would do that for people. Or here in the sirup pumps." He nodded toward the young couple at the soda counter. "Take them, for instance. Pair o' nice kids. They're in a bad way. A real bad way."

"The boy looks beat down."

"Dave Leonard. Mechanic over at Belknap's garage. Makin's of a good worker but got a wild streak in him. Grew up in the shacks over on the north side. Tannery Hollow. Had a no-good father run away when Dave was just a sprout. Last year the kid was chasin' around with a pack o' young rascals. They had jalopies that Dave souped up for 'em till they could outrun anything on the roads. Racin' and darin' one another to do crazy stunts. Like to kill somebody sometime. Wonder they didn't. Or get mixed up in these gas-station hold-ups been goin' on."

"He's in love with the girl?"

"Heels over head, boy. She knocked him all to sticks and staves. Better way o' sayin' it, she put him together out o' the bits and pieces he already was in."

"Who is she?"

"Louise Korinek. Young widow. Her first was a steady, quiet feller. Electrician. His folks were Czech. He took sick and died — some trouble with the blood cells. Left her with a child — pretty little girl. Before Louise

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got a regular job at the silverware factory she worked here at the counter for a while. A real nice girl. Everybody liked her. She came mighty near gettin' Dave straightened out."

"Near?"

"Yup. They were goin' to get married. They'll never make a go of it now. I look to see the boy slump right back into bad company. Shame." He drew a heavy breath and started toward the little glass enclosure. "We can make a sign for the back bar. 'The Milk of Paradise.' See if it catches on, Harry."

"Chief," Harry called after him, loud and bumptiously, "one sip of my specialty and anybody'll forget all their troubles."

The girl glanced up quickly. The slight movement of her body made her purse slide from her lap. As she snatched for it and missed, her knuckles struck the hard, heavy thing in Dave's side pocket. Her hand twisted and grasped it through the cloth. Her eyes, the smoky blue of a summer rain-cloud, widened. She let go of the thing quickly.

"Dave! What's that for?" Her body moved away from his. "You said some of the crowd were already — Those hold-ups — Are you —?"

His strong, dark face reddened. "I didn't get this to use on somebody else. I don't stick up gas stations."

"Where'd you get it? What for?"

"One o' the guys. . . . When you told me you were all washed up with me —" He paused and then blurted, under his breath, "If I feel like trying a little Russian roulette, it's my business."

"Dave, no!"

He said desperately, "I don't know what I — Does it make any difference to you?"

She drew the kerchief closer around her lovely, tortured young face. "Don't say things like that just to make me sorry for you, Dave. I can't help how I feel. I was in love with you. I really was. But now — what can I do? No matter how I try, it's no use. I keep thinking about what happened."

Her purse lay forgotten on the floor. The boy almost stepped on it as he stood up. "I'm just making it worse for you by sticking around and arguing. I'll let you alone from now on. Good-by, Louise."

Yet he tarried. The drugstore was achingly quiet. Behind the glass of his cubicle, Mr. Cooper nodded over his book. There was a comfortable smell of toast and bacon in the air, lingering from the last club sandwich that the druggist had served. It made Dave Leonard swallow hard, thinking of pleasant Sunday-morning breakfasts he might have had in a home that would never be his.

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After a few moments the girl raised her head and looked vaguely about. The new soda man at once moved toward her.

"You'd like something?"

She shook her head and murmured a few words under her breath.

"If *what* could only be true?" Harry asked.

"What you said to Mr. Cooper. About a drink that would make a person forget."

"There might be one."

"I don't believe it."

Dave Leonard turned and strode to the door and out into the windy dimness of the street corner, where he stood looking back through the window as if he could not make the final move that would take her out of his sight. The gale clawed at his hair and flipped the tails of his coat.

Harry reached unhurriedly for the tall metal container under the electric mixer. "What do you want to forget?"

"I thought everyone knew." Her tone was bitter.

"I just came to town."

"Then you'll hear about it." She watched his hands move deftly, pouring, spooning.

"Something happened to your little girl," Harry said gently. "I heard that."

Suddenly she was rocking on the stool, as Dave had rocked, trying to suppress her agony. Words tumbled out in a whisper. "I know he didn't mean it. I asked him to supper and left him to baby-sit with Joanie while I ran out to the store. I'd forgotten to get butter. So he'd been out all the night before with that gang he'd said he would give up. A farewell party. That's what he said it was, afterwards. I didn't know it, but he was dead for sleep. So he dozed off, and Joanie managed to get the door open, and she toddled out into the roadway right in front of—" She closed her eyes and wrung her hands.

Harry set the container under the mixer. "I don't wonder you'd like to wipe it out of your mind."

"I wish I could forget all about it. I love him, and I wish I could forget I ever met him."

Harry frowned. "He tried once, didn't he? Maybe he could try again and make good this time. He's had a pretty tough lesson, sister." He pushed his cap to the back of his sandy tousle of hair.

"But I would always remember that night — how I came home and found Joanie — Whenever I'm with Dave, I go crazy trying not to think of it. If that was to go on and on — and it *would* go on and on if I married him — I'd really go crazy."

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Harry nodded. "I see what you mean."

Her gaze was fixed and full of a sad certainty. "I wish it could be just as if I'd never seen him. Is that crazy?"

"No, it isn't."

"It is. It couldn't happen. I keep wishing, as if that could do any good. But I know it's no use."

He touched the switch, and the mixer set up its whining buzz. At that moment, by some freak of the storm, the lights in the store went out.

Dave Leonard, watching from the darkness outside, his senses harried and bedeviled by storm and sorrow, was no doubt confused by the sudden darkness and the after-image of the extinguished lights. It seemed to him that from the contents of whatever was in the mixer an eerie radiance shone upward briefly on the wide mouth and slanting, pixyish eyes of the soda man.

Then the lights were on again. Harry set a glass of foamy white liquid before the girl and twitched a pair of paper-clad straws from a vase. "Try this for what ails you," he commanded, with professional cheeriness.

As the girl, sighing listlessly, took a sip, the door whipped open and a gust knocked a cardboard cutout advertisement from the cigar counter.

Dave demanded, "What goes on here?"

Harry increased the angle of one eyebrow. "What's your gripe, pal?"

"What's with the lights? What was he trying on you, Louise?"

The girl stopped to swallow the last mouthful she had pulled up through the straws. She met the boy's puzzled, angry gaze with unconcern. "Who is this, Harry? He seems to think he knows me."

"Louise, don't *rib* me!" the boy groaned. "I've got plenty coming to me, but not that."

The smoky blue eyes, clear and untroubled, looked him up and down.

"This is Dave Leonard, Louise," Harry said. "He works at Belknap's garage. Not a bad guy when you get to know him."

The corners of her mouth fluttered with suppressed amusement. "I think he's rather pretty, Harry. Maybe he won't be so hysterical when we meet again."

Dave caught her arm. "What's the idea of this new line? What are you trying to do to me?"

She twisted free. "Are you drunk, Mr. Leonard? I never saw you before. And I'm not sure I want to see you again, if this is a sample of how you act when you're introduced to a girl."

She walked along the aisle and out the door with a carefree swing to her shoulders and hips, plucking off the dark kerchief to let her gold-silk hair fall glinting to the nape of her neck.

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The boy slumped to his stool, jaw slack. "She wouldn't gag it up like that. Not Louise. She really didn't know me —"

He looked dully about. Mr. Cooper dozed in his chair. Harry was rinsing out the glass. Dave's face tightened, darkened. "I get it. . . . It's dope." He put his hand in his pocket. "What did you give her, smart guy?"

Harry inspected the glass. "The Milk of Paradise."

"Oh, yeah?"

"I just said it."

"What's that?"

"My specialty. You heard me tell Mr. Cooper."

"Makes people forget their troubles?"

"Check."

"Malarkey."

"Have it your way."

The boy's handsome features twisted, broke up into an ugly, shaken pattern. "I've been through enough. I don't take kidding from a soda jerk."

Harry nodded. "I don't blame you, bud. . . . Who's kidding?"

Dave's face hardened. "Know what's going to happen? You're going to mix me that stuff o' yours. If it works on me, you got no worry. If it don't — if you and Louise were giving me the funny business, then you got lumps coming to you." He shoved the thing in his pocket a few inches forward, abruptly. "Get mixing."

Harry moved a hand slowly toward the container. "You're the customer. You want it, you get it. . . . She wasn't kidding you, Dave. She doesn't remember anything about it."

"Or about me?"

"That's right."

Veins showed on the boy's forehead. The thing in his pocket jerked. "I ought to let you have it right now."

"Why, Dave?"

"You're lying or else you took away the only decent thing I ever had."

"Her love for you?"

"Mix. . . . You hear me?"

Harry's hands began to fill the container.

"Be sure," the boy said savagely, "to put in whatever stuff you gave her — because if you don't make me forget like she forgot, if it's just a rib to make a monkey out of me —" He shut his lips grimly.

Harry put the container under the mixer. The motor began its cheery buzz. Harry leaned back against the back bar. He said quietly, "You fool."

The boy's shoulders twitched.

"You've got your chance, and you kick it away," Harry said.

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"What chance?"

"Amnesia, people will call it. They'll say she forgot because of the shock. That's your chance to get to know her all over again — to make up to her."

"And when she learns about what happened? Somebody'll tell her. People are nice and obliging that way."

"It'll be like something she might read in the paper. Sad and terrible, but no emotional tension for her."

The boy rubbed a hand over his wet face. "Not for her. But for me. I'm going through hell too. I want out too. . . . Give me that stuff."

Harry stopped the mixer and poured the liquid into a glass. The fluorescent ceiling lights flickered, and his face seemed curiously shadowed.

"Dave, if you want it, I have to give it to you. I haven't any choice. . . . Are you sure you want it?"

The boy managed to squeeze words through a throatful of gravel. "How do you think it is to look forward to years of remembering? I wake up at night, and I hear that little baby screaming —" The gravel choked him.

"So if you get that out of your mind, everything will be fine?"

The boy moved his head up and down.

"For you, that is," Harry said.

"Not only me. For her sake. I want her to be happy most of all. How can I marry her, if I go on remembering — ?"

The soda man hardly raised his voice, but it made the glasses stacked on the back bar rattle. "What's that thing in your pocket?"

Sullenly, "You know what it is."

"And I know the gang you got it from."

"So?"

"So you forget everything. You forget the bitter medicine you've had to swallow. And what happens? Get married to Louise, and the first fit of boredom, the first hour of discontent, and back you go to those guys. Why not? There'll be days when hard work is a bellyful, and a quick heist of a gas station means excitement and quick money."

"Look here —"

"No memory of agony to act as a brake. Just some old friends and a foot on the gas, same as before. And a gun. So you'll smash her life into rubbish for the second time. This is called loving a girl."

The boy slid off the stool and stood facing the counter squarely. His face was deep red, and the vein in his forehead was like a twisted cord. His hand crept out of his pocket. The ugly dark metal snout of a pistol thrust from his fist. His breath made several long rasping cycles before he moved again.

He poked the gun forward and laid it on the counter. "Get rid of it, will you, Harry? I don't want to touch it again."

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The man behind the counter nodded.

"And that drink, Harry. I still think it's malarkey. If Louise don't remember, it's because something in her mind couldn't stand the strain. That happens to people. I've read about it. . . . But I don't want to drink any stuff, even if I don't believe in it. I did something. There's a consequence I got to face. I can take it. Yeah, I can take it. You know what I mean?" The boy's shoulders went back, and the red died out of his set face.

Before Harry could answer, the door opened, and Louise came in with a gust of fresh air. Her hair was a gay, bright whirl about her face, and her eyes snapped with the excitement of fighting the breeze.

"Left my purse," she said lightly. "I'm always forgetting something."

Dave retrieved the bag from the floor. He said, "Maybe you thought I was too fresh before, Mrs. Korinek. When you know me better, you won't think that."

The girl smiled. "Am I going to know you better?"

"I hope so. I sure hope so."

Mr. Cooper woke, yawned, and hobbled out into the store, stiff from sleeping in his straight-backed chair. Dave and Louise were deep in conversation at the soda counter, their heads close together. The girl laughed, a light, sweet sound in the stillness of the store.

As Mr. Cooper neared them, Dave reached out a hand and pushed aside a glass full of foamy white liquid. The druggist picked it up. "Your drink, Dave?"

"I'll pay for it, but I don't want it."

"What's wrong with it?" Mr. Cooper took a sip, then a swallow, before dumping the rest of it in the sink. "Darn good, I dad! . . . Milk shake. Wasn't that what you wanted?"

"Harry called it the Milk of Paradise," Dave stammered. "I don't want it. But I'll pay for —"

Mr. Cooper stopped smacking his lips to interrupt, "Harry? Who's Harry?"

"The new soda man you — Say, where is he?"

"Haven't had any new soda man since Ben Ticknor quit this afternoon. Reminds me I gotta put up the sign."

"Now look, Mr. Cooper," Dave began, but realization choked back the words. There were only the druggist and Louise, and neither of them could — Why, there was nobody in the world who would ever believe him! He glanced at the eager, sweet face beside him. . . . Let it be that way then.

The druggist shambled toward the window and tilted his cardboard —

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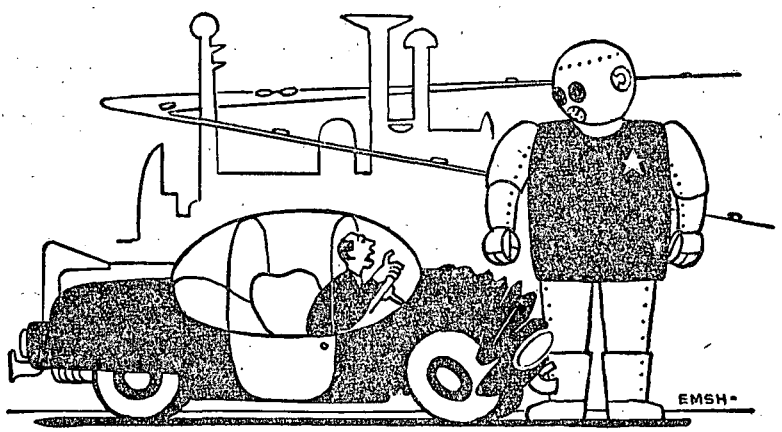
SODA MAN WANTED — against the glass. He was humming to himself, some old, half-remembered song. He thought, "Well! Haven't sung for a long time, I dad!"

Beyond the glitter of the store lights reflected in the pane his old eyes did not see the figure on the street corner — the beaten-up raincoat, the battered cardboard suitcase, the wind-rumpled hair.

Under the street lamp Harry thumbed through his dog-eared memorandum book. "Hmmm . . . Check off Highland Springs. Where now? Let's see. East Grand Forks, Minnesota." He gazed reproachfully at the clearing sky. "Well, if anybody thinks this job is nothing but a milk run —"

As he started down the street, a great swirl of wind whooped down out of the sky and hustled him along out of sight into the shadows.



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Guy DeAngelis is one of the newest writers of science fiction, and one who manages to infuse into his work that compulsive vigor of storytelling which has been more characteristic of the best pulps in other fields, such as mystery or adventure, than it has of science fiction magazines. At the time he wrote this story, he was also, by profession, a door-to-door salesman — an occupation which enables him to give a new personal immediacy to the theme of alien invasion.

Door to Door

by GUY DEANGELIS

THE FOOTSTEPS UPSTAIRS went back and forth and Nora knew he would be coming down soon. She felt herself beginning to shiver again, and one arm slanted down across the front of her body, blindly protecting the life which had begun to grow inside her.

Everything was ready on the breakfast table. Suddenly, still listening to the footsteps, she tore a crust from her piece of toast and left it on her plate, to make it look as though she had eaten.

Hurrying quietly into the kitchen she hid the rest of her toast in the little covered can there and emptied her cup of coffee in the sink. The footsteps began to come downstairs and she let herself out, quickly, into the back yard.

After what had happened the night before, she couldn't sit across the table from him. Not even once more, she decided.

Something cold and damp brushed against her ankles and she gasped, stepping back. It was merely a coil of garden hose but she was shaken by an absurd fear that its serpent length would come alive, to wind itself up about her.

She was a pretty girl, not very tall, with an almost fragile sort of face and a compact little body. Now she stood in the garden, not knowing what to do next. I must be going completely insane, she thought.

But I'm not crazy — I'm not! If Stan can turn into someone else without warning then it's only natural to distrust everything. And, whoever he is, that isn't my husband!

Nora went around to the front of the house. She saw her neighbor,

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Constance Willis, there in the next yard. Connie's friendliness was as much a part of her as her freckles and her wide, happy mouth. The two women drifted toward each other until a picket fence stopped them.

"Say, what happened to your menagerie?" Connie asked. Nora knew she meant Rhubarb, the big orange tomcat, and Smokey, Stan's black spaniel. "I haven't seen either of them around in days."

"They went," Nora said dully.

"Just simply went, just like that?" Connie wondered. Nora nodded. Then she heard a door open behind her and she whispered:

"Be careful! Here he is now!"

He came out and got in the car. Connie waved to him. "Hi, tall-enough, dark and handsome!" He smiled briefly at them, backed the car out, and drove away. "What goes on with you two?" Connie asked. "He scarcely noticed me. He's so different lately, Nora!"

Nora took hold of the fence with both hands. It was going to come out now and she couldn't stop it. "He is different. Connie, he isn't Stan at all!"

"I know. Sometimes Shep gets so wound up in business worries he has no time for me and I begin to feel as if he was just a guest in the house. An absent-minded professor, at that."

"That isn't what I mean. Connie, that isn't the man I married!"

Her neighbor grinned. "I wonder how many women have said that. The honeymoon has to end sometime, you know, and you and Stan have been married two years now."

"Connie, you've simply got to believe me. It happened the night the stranger came. Since then the man I've been living with is not Stan Broderick. I don't mean that he's changed. He's actually some other — I don't even know whether you could call him a man!"

Connie stared. "But I just saw him, darling! If that wasn't Stan, who was it? And if he isn't a man, what in heaven's name is he?"

Nora stared back at her. "I don't know," she whispered finally. She turned and went toward her house, trying not to run. It's like having a door slammed in your face, Nora thought, as she stood aimlessly in her living room. Connie hadn't understood a word. She felt that all the doors in the world were suddenly closed to her, shutting her away from everyone. Everyone except her father, now that Stan was gone. And while her father would do his best to believe her, she would have no answer to give him except the one she had given Connie.

I don't know.

"Nora —" Connie said from the porch. She came in. "I don't know what this is all about but I do want to help. Tell me, dear."

Nora shook her head. Yet now that she had begun to talk about it she

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couldn't stop, and she heard herself saying: "Stan went away. That's all I know. Then Smokey and Rhubarb went away too." Her voice began to get out of control. "I suppose I could get my pets back if I searched for them, and offered a reward. But somehow I know that nothing will ever bring Stan back again."

"Good grief!" Connie said. "No wonder he's been going around looking like grim death. Nora, just because you're going to have a baby —! I'm going to telephone your father."

"No — don't!"

"I don't know what to do for you. And he's not only your father. He's your doctor too."

"No!" Nora said again, but all at once she wanted her father very much. She dropped down on the couch and hid her face, making a comforting darkness for herself. And remembering . . .

The stranger had come out of the night a week ago. When Nora snapped on the porch light he said, "Good evening. Is your husband in?"

He was very well dressed and his hair shone white at the temples so that she said, without thinking, "Why, yes, he is. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you." He stooped to pick up a big leather case. He had put it against the front wall of the house just out of her line of sight and she realized, a moment too late, that she had let in another door-to-door salesman. He held out his hand as Stan came up to him.

"Hello, Mr. Broderick. This is something of a neighborhood matter and we'd like to get your opinion on it."

Nora had heard that approach many times before and sometimes it led to insurance or books or cutlery or other things they wanted to buy anyway, so that she didn't mind too much. Then the man with the little silver wings on his head gave his name. Looking back, she knew everything had begun to go wrong at that instant.

He had a simple name but it was instantly forgotten; it seemed to wipe across part of her mind, leaving a little blank space there.

She and Stan sat together on the couch and the stranger opened his case and spread a map on the floor. It was a familiar one — a map of their own city — but there was a maze of luminous lines overlaid on it. The stranger pointed to the end of one luminous line and she began to follow it through the maze intently. Suddenly, she was reminded of a childhood incident.

A boy who kept chickens had shown her how to hypnotize a hen. He had held it on a table and stroked its beak, carrying the line out across the table top each time. When he let go of the hen it stayed there, helplessly staring at an imaginary line.

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She had been frightened and a little nauseated. She began to feel the same way again. I'm not a silly hen being dominated by a superior mind, she thought. This is my home and this man is just another salesman. I'm going to stand up and tell him we're not interested, and that will be that.

As her head lifted she saw that Stan was staring wordlessly at the map. Then the stranger's hand moved again, pointing down at its luminous lines. Her gaze followed obediently and her mind was recaptured by the maze, going deeper and deeper as she hunted for a way out.

None of us are saying anything, she thought desperately. But that's ridiculous! People just don't sit and stare when they're buying and selling. Stan and this man must be saying something, she decided, but it doesn't mean any more to me than human speech would mean to a chicken.

At last the stranger was through with them. She saw Stan leading him to the door and out to the porch. She had the oddly inverted impression that it was her husband, and not the stranger, who was being sent away.

"Stan —!"

He came back in. "Yes, Nora?"

"Nothing. I just had the strangest feeling. Silly." She turned away and saw the big leather case. "He left his bag here! And that map."

"Naturally." Stan folded the map and put it in the case. "I thought you understood that. You do, don't you?"

Nora nodded, ashamed to admit she didn't understand at all. Stan picked up the case and began to carry it toward his study. She tried to laugh as she said, shakily, "He was quite a character, wasn't he?"

Stan had hesitated thoughtfully before he said, "Out of this world . . ." And he had closed the study door on her.

Now, lying on the couch and waiting, Nora searched for something definite to tell her father. There was the vivid memory of a time when she had been sitting half-dressed at her vanity, brushing her hair. All at once Stan's images were there in the triple mirror, looking at her as though they had never seen her body before, so that she felt gooseflesh puckering coldly up her spine. He said, "When will the child begin to distort you?"

After a moment she turned to face him. "What a lovely clinical attitude! All along we've been calling it 'our baby,' but now I find you've just been waiting for me to look distorted with child. Stan!"

"It was a rather thoughtless question," he had admitted then. "I suppose it's only natural for the whole period of gestation to become a sentimental matter when such a primitive method of insemination has been used."

Two nights were particularly clear in Nora's memory. One was the night their spaniel had gone away.

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Something had wakened her suddenly that night. A sound, she had thought at first, but everything was still. Yet the sensation continued, an irritation as nerve-racking as the shrilling of an alarm clock. Stan had not come up to bed. She got up restlessly and went to a window.

It was a mild night and on such nights Smokey liked to sleep on the front porch. Now she saw him trying to back down the porch steps. His jaw hung open and she sensed that he was in agony. She felt, too, that some compulsion held him leashed to the house. Loyalty, Nora thought. Love. She leaned out and whispered to him.

"Smokey —" He looked up, begging with his eyes. She pointed down the street. "Go on, little doggie. Go on!"

She went on watching long after the small black shape had scuttled away into the darkness. Then she went noiselessly along the upstairs hall. She began to see spots before her eyes.

No, not spots, she decided, as she neared the stairs. They were cryptic patterns of light ghosting upward across her vision. No two were alike, yet all were as definitely related as magnified snowflakes. Leaning over the banister she saw that they were materializing in front of the closed door to Stan's study, and drifting up toward her.

Now the irritation which had wakened her was so maddening she felt as if every bone in her body was vibrating — buzzing, almost — within her flesh. Her whole skull seemed to be coming apart and she had to fight down the impulse to rip her nails through the thin flesh at her temples and dig out the pain.

It can't be the lights, she thought, because they're not bright enough to hurt. It must be a sound. Dogs can hear sounds we can't, and deaf people can hear by bone conduction.

She remembered an article she had read about television, explaining the ultra high frequencies which would soon add many more channels. The author had gotten a little off the subject and she tried to remember what else he had written. It was something about certain rays — gamma rays? — which, if they were boosted up to immeasurable megacycles, might even have the power to create matter. It seemed oddly important now but her head hurt so much she couldn't concentrate.

The study door began to open. A dazzling flight of bolder patterns came up from below and the pain was so bad she ran back to the bedroom. She got into bed and squeezed her palms against her ears. At last, the pain stopped. Nora felt herself beginning to sweat, clammily, as she fell into an unconsciousness which was deeper than sleep.

Nora had not found her big orange tomcat at the door the next morning, complaining imperiously for food and affection. Neither he nor Smokey had

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ever come home again. And that, she felt, was some sort of proof too.

That first night, Nora decided now, was nothing compared to the second. The unbearable, unhearable sound had come again just last night.

Last night it had wakened her so cruelly she had jolted upright in bed as though someone had touched her with a high voltage wire. Every nerve as well as every bone seemed to be jangling in unison. She was afraid to leave the bedroom but the pain was so frightful something had to be done about it. Nora went into the upstairs hall, her fingernails clawing at her scalp, and peered over the banister.

This time there were no kaleidoscopic star bursts. Perhaps they had been some sort of static, she thought, and now that they had been eliminated the soundless screaming in the air was more intense. She was about to call her husband's name when the study door opened below her.

It was the salesman with the silver hair at his temples, and the big leather case. He turned toward the steps leading to the basement. She decided that he was not the same man after all, although the difference was a subtle one. She heard the side door of the house open and close quietly and she knew he was gone.

Stan had kept the study locked, lately, but now she could see in. The leather case the stranger had brought was standing in the center of the room. The outline of still another man was coming into sight, in midair, above it. The silver frosting above his ears and all the other details evolved swiftly, like the negative of a photograph in its poisonous bath. Complete now, he marched down through empty space to the floor, and began to follow the other.

Nora screamed.

Stan came out and looked up at her, his eyes bulging wide and white-rimmed. A black wave of giddiness drenched her mind then, drowning everything.

Without knowing how she had gotten there nor how long she had been there, Nora found herself lying awake in bed again. She sat up, gasping. The table light between her bed and Stan's clicked on, and he said:

"Is anything wrong?"

"No. I don't think so. I must have had a nightmare."

"I want you to tell me what your dream was."

"I can't," she lied. "I thought I was wide awake — that's the worst kind of nightmare — and that impossible things were happening. But I can't remember what they were, now."

"Are you sure you can't remember anything?"

"Yes. I'll be all right now." She saw that he was staring at her in that peculiar way again. A speculative way, she thought — even a morbid one.

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Her sheer nightgown seemed completely transparent all at once. "Turn out the light, please."

He waited until she had fallen back and pulled the covers over her breasts before he turned off the light. Then he said a strange thing in the dark. "They're merely secondary sexual characteristics, of course, but I'm beginning to understand why they're emphasized so in entertainment and advertising. Odd, how quickly propaganda can condition even the most objective mind."

Now Nora sat up on the couch. "Feeling better?" Connie asked. Nora nodded, paying no attention to her, because two lines of thought had begun to run through her mind at the same time, alternately twining and separating.

Last night I was afraid he'd come to me. When that was just what I should have wanted, normally. This one hasn't even kissed me since the night the stranger came to our door. I'd have noticed that in a single day if I'd been living with the real Stan.

The baby! What kind of a father will this one make for a human baby? There are ghost stories about changeling babies, but who ever heard of a changeling father? I'm glad I was two months pregnant when the stranger called on us. At least, I can be sure it's Stan's baby.

That's some sort of proof, isn't it — being a kissless wife? Suppose I told everyone this man isn't my husband at all, because he's suddenly forgotten how to make love?

My husband doesn't love me any more. . . . The thought dwindled in Nora's mind until it seemed very trite and neurotic and even a little like a punch line for a dirty joke.

She heard her father's car in the drive. Then the couch gave to the big man's weight as he sat and looked down at her, rubbing one heavy hand over his jaw. It was a gesture which made him look very much like Lionel Barrymore playing a doctor, and sometimes she had teased him about it. He said:

"Here, now! What's all this?"

Connie said, "I'm going to let you take over, Dr. Harriman. Just call me if you want anything."

"Thank you, Constance." His big fingertips came down on Nora's wrist. "The baby giving you any trouble, Nora?"

"Heavens, no! Ordinarily I might not even remember I'm pregnant for days at a time."

"Ordinarily? Has anything unusual been going on?"

She looked up at him, wondering what to say. Once, when she had reached

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her early teens, he had explained that being an only child — and the motherless child of a doctor, at that — could easily lead to hypochondria, so that she would have to be like the shoemaker's child: the last one to get shoes, and then only when they were badly needed. She found she couldn't tell him anything. *How can I convince him when I'm not quite convinced myself? And what would it do to him if he thought I was insane? I'm all he has.*

So she said, "I guess I'm just allowing myself an emotional binge. I waited a long time to become a crybaby, didn't I, Dad? I never was before."

"That's no answer, Nora."

"I don't think there is any answer. If I change my mind I'll let you know."

Dr. Matt Harriman chuckled, "Remember, that's a promise. You've got to think of the baby now. If there's anything really wrong this is no time for fear, or martyrdom." He bent to kiss her cheek. "Goodbye, Nora."

"Goodbye." All at once the word seemed to have a terrible finality. I've failed completely, she thought, listening to him drive away. First with Connie and now with Dad. Now there's no one left at all. She realized she had begun to laugh breathlessly and that tears were running hot down her face at the same time, even seeping ridiculously into her distorted mouth.

The baby, she reminded herself desperately. I've got to think of the baby!

She got up and began to walk aimlessly through the house, wiping her face clumsily with the backs of her hands. If I'm really mad, she decided, then the poor baby mustn't be born at all. Somehow, I've got to make certain I'm fit for motherhood!

Then she thought of a way. She looked at herself in a mirror. Her lids were pink and swollen and her hair was a mess. But she had hours and hours before evening, when he would come home. She smiled at her reflection crookedly.

Good old woman's weapon! Our greatest strength and our greatest weakness too. That's one test no disguise could ever pass. Even in the darkest place with my eyes shut tight, I'd know the way Stan's mouth fits into mine and the way his hands move on me. . . .

When he came home that evening she had cocktails ready. He shook his head. "No, thanks. After all, alcohol's a depressant, actually."

"Of course it is. Do you think I'm a doctor's daughter for nothing? But it does release certain inhibitions, and that's what I had in mind."

"Which inhibitions, Nora?"

"Stan — now honestly!" She lolled on the couch, half sitting, half lying. "You've never needed any particular encouragement before." She forced her body to uncurl, displaying itself. "This isn't at all like you, darling."

"Darling . . ." he said uncertainly. She felt that both the word itself and its significance were bewildering to him. "I've been stupid, in more

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than one way," he admitted, looming over her. "We can't have you feeling that way about me." Then he was on the couch, too, his arms going around her. Eagerly.

He does want me, she thought. *He still wants me!* Exhilaration sent her hands moving over him, her mind stubbornly closed to their insistent testimony that there was an elusive strangeness about his textures — like the difference between stroking calfskin and kid — like the difference between the hair of a man's head and the sleek pelt of an otter.

"Stan —" she said impatiently, tilting her face up to him. Through half closed eyes she saw his face lowering toward her. But instead of kissing her, his mouth came open in a silent snarl of delight and clamped gently on her pulsing throat. There was no threat in the caress, for his teeth poised very carefully over the defenseless flesh there. Yet, now that all her senses were desperately tuned to his, some alien ancestral memory filtered from his mind to hers and she knew the contact had once been a deadly one. She knew that she was, symbolically, offering her life — that it was forfeit to him if she should ever fail him in his choice.

His choice . . . *of what?*

There seemed to be an answer to that, but it was one which could never adapt itself to the human mind. Nora felt a sudden revulsion which seemed to soil every inch of her skin with an unreal, oily grittiness.

She dug her fingers into his fur and lifted his head so that she could kiss him. That was better, yet worse, because it was completely meaningless. And Stan's kisses had never been that. She pushed him away.

"Nora —!"

She laughed and put her palm over his mouth, still holding him off. "I just happened to remember that dinner is almost ready. I'll keep, but dinner won't. Afterward, if you still feel this way."

He got up and for the first time there was emotion in his voice. Anger. "That's the kind of byplay to expect, I suppose, when this type of relationship is reduced to a barbaric emotional level. The female takes the initiative long enough to encourage pursuit. Then she retreats, forcing the male to take the initiative and with it the consequent responsibilities, if any. A sort of psychological mating dance."

"You're beginning to talk like a reference book," she objected, getting up and smoothing out her dress. "What's more, you know too much." But as she went into the kitchen she thought: *You don't know as much as you think you do. You and your kind, whatever you may be, are underestimating us. You don't know what women are capable of when their families are in danger.*

She heard the sound of a newspaper being handled. This one didn't read a paper casually, as Stan had. He went through it page by page, like someone

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looking for a warning between the lines. He would pay no attention to her, nor anything else, until he had finished with the paper.

Nora knew, quite definitely, what to do next.

Dr. Harriman's daughter had been the kind of little girl who had put fallen fledglings back in their nests and who had brought stray dogs and cats to her father so that he could bandage their hurts. Now she went back into the living room and took the heavy brass tongs from the fireplace. Holding them with both hands, like a baseball bat, she came soundlessly up behind the man's chair and hit him under one ear as hard as she could.

It was a blow which should have knocked him senseless. But he jerked upright, making a horrid wordless sound, before he slumped down on his hands and knees. Nora stepped around the chair and struck again. And again, swinging the tongs until there were spatterings of red on her stockings and dress.

Now the baby's safe, she thought.

Then she remembered the salesmen she had seen leaving her house the night before, and she realized that her work was scarcely begun. Her thoughts soared upward until she felt that she could see the roofs and spires of the whole city. I've got to make sure all the children in town are safe, she told herself. And all the wives and husbands.

Now for the transmitter, or whatever it was, hidden in that leather case! Nora found the key to the study in one of the dead thing's pockets.

The case was still there but when she struck at it with the tongs they rebounded harmlessly. She tried to unlock it so that she could smash what was inside. She couldn't get it open.

After a moment, she tore the drapes from the study windows and piled them over the case. She brought in a can of turpentine from the service porch and poured it over the drapes, moving quickly because the case might begin to give off that terrible vibration again at any instant.

Hurrying to the living room, she wadded a sheet of newspaper and set it afire with a table lighter. Standing in the study doorway, she tossed the flaming little ball onto the pungent mess in the middle of the floor. For an instant nothing happened. Then there was a sudden puff of air and a cone of fire writhed up, its oily black tongue licking the ceiling. Through the familiar roar of fire, Nora heard other sounds. Sounds coming from the case — deep strumming ones like bass piano wires a mile high and tiny, tinkling ones like the prisms of a crystal chandelier stirring.

She turned and ran out of the house. Getting into the car, she backed it out onto the road. Before she could drive away every window in the house lit up with a searing violet glare. The whole structure blew up off its foundations, collapsing outward in sections as it fell back. A flaming bit of timber

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smacked against the hood of the car and bounced into the gutter as she started off.

All the way to her father's house she kept looking for men with graying hair and leather cases. If she could catch one crossing the street she could run him down, and there would be one less to exterminate. While she didn't see any, she knew they were there in the city somewhere.

In a little while she was running up the front steps of the big old house which had been her home for so many years. Her father was waiting for her at the door.

"Nora! Are you all right? The fire chief just phoned me, and I was about to go over to your place. What happened?"

"Dad! Dad, I wrecked it. The leather case. All we have to do is collect them and burn them. That's what I did, and it blew up!"

After a moment Dr. Harriman said, "You'd better come in." He closed the door. Nora's knees buckled under her weight and she held onto him for a moment, her head against his chest, knowing that everything would be all right now. "You — you know about Stan?" he asked.

"Yes, I've known for days that I'd lost him forever but I didn't want to admit it, even to myself."

He shook his head. "You seem to realize clearly enough that your home has been blown up, but I'd like to know what happened before that. You see, dear, some of the things inside the house were blown outward. The police were able to identify Stan. Not only that, but they were able to see that something ugly had happened to him before the explosion."

"His head, you mean? I did that with the fire tongs. That's one we won't have to worry about any more!"

"You did it? To Stan? Nora, do you realize what you're saying?"

"Dad, we've got to get busy and save the whole town — the whole world, for all I know. There simply isn't time to stand here arguing!"

"You'd better come into the dispensary, Nora. I won't let anyone know you're here until we've had a chance to get this all straightened out." He went to his desk and turned on a lamp with a big old-fashioned green shade. "Sit down and tell me all about it. Tell me everything you can remember."

He leaned back and there was no expression on his face as he listened to her, but after awhile one hand came up to rub his jaw. After she had finished, he said gently:

"Nora, you're not lying to me, are you?"

"No, Dad — no!"

"Of course not. I didn't think you would. And in that case —"

She stared at him with a fresh terror. "Dad! You don't think I'm — insane?"

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"Insane!" He grunted impatiently. "The term has no medical significance. If you mean do I think you are suffering from delusions, the answer is resoundingly 'No!' I know you too well — your heredity, your entire history from birth. As much as any human being can be sure of another's psychological state, I am certain that this is no hallucinosis." He stopped short, then repeated slowly, "No *medical* significance . . ."

"There's only one thing to do then, isn't there?" she urged. "We've got to tell the authorities — the police and the FBI and everyone. We've got to stop these — these awful strangers."

Her father got up and began to pace the dispensary. It may have been the light from the green shade, but she thought he looked much older than he had that afternoon.

"Yes," he said tonelessly. "That's the only thing to do. You've got to tell the authorities that the town — the nation, the world — is being invaded by beings from another world which manage to look like inoffensive door-to-door salesmen. Master minds which step out of nowhere and carry sinister briefcases and have the power to take over anybody's identity. You've got to make everybody believe that your husband, who wasn't your husband any more, was going to bite your throat. But he didn't, so you beat his brains out."

"Dad . . ." she faltered. "When you put it that way it sounds so —"

"Of course. It sounds 'insane,' doesn't it? The term with no medical significance. Only a legal one. No, Nora: you can't shut your eyes. Look at your choice — our choice: A trial for first degree murder and a certain sentence of life imprisonment . . . or a quiet commitment — and thank God I have enough influence to arrange for a good private institution."

"A madhouse!"

"Words, Nora. Would you sooner see my grandchild born in prison, the son of a convicted —"

"Don't!"

Her shrill cry echoed in the silence. Then she laughed. Her father peered at her doubtfully, but it was not hysteria. It was only, she thought, that it was all very funny. *Tell the truth: the only guaranteed insanity defense in a world gone mad . . .*

She heard a voice that must have been hers saying, "There's only one thing to do, isn't there? Go ahead, Dad. Please."

Her father fumbled with the dial of his desk telephone, his fingers shaking so that he had to stop. She heard him take in a deep, unsteady breath. Then, very slowly and carefully, he began to dial the number again.

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To date, the sinister researches of Professor Cleanth Penn Ransom have affected only the higher branches of education; but now, in the curious episode of the cipher, the yo-yo and the venereous Venusian, he threatens to shake the very foundations of the junior high school system. Are even our nursery schools, we wonder, safe from this maddest of scientists?

Both the author and the editors wish to acknowledge the technical assistance of Larry White, Duncan Yo-Yo Skill Award '52.

The Gastronomical Error

by H. NEARING, JR.

"I wish," said Professor Cleanth Penn Ransom, of the Mathematics Faculty, "it was June 7, 2004." He squeezed his little belly behind the steering wheel and started the car.

"Now see here, Ransom." Professor Archibald MacTate, of Philosophy, withdrew his head from the other door. "If you've invented a time machine —"

"No, no." Ransom waved his colleague into the car. "June 7, 2004 is the next transit of Venus."

"Oh." MacTate got in and closed the door hesitantly. Suddenly he looked at Ransom. "The next what?"

"Transit of Venus. You know. When Venus comes between the Earth and the Sun. Doesn't happen very often on account of its orbit — Venus's — being inclined at an angle of —"

MacTate opened the door again. "No spaceships, either."

"Look, MacTate." Ransom reached across him, slammed the door, and shot the car impetuously into the traffic. "It's getting dark, and we've got to get out to the observatory. We're not *going* there. Venus, I mean. We're just going to look."

"But why do I — ?"

"Well —" Ransom laughed. "Old Appleberry's a cantankerous sort. And if we get into any arguments —"

"Good heavens, Ransom. Don't tell me Appleberry's still around. I thought he retired twenty years ago."

"I guess he did. Sort of. But they've got a rule you can work half time and

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still get your pension. He totters around the observatory taking pictures of comets and stuff. And practicing with his yo-yo. But grouchy as a rattlesnake. So if we get into any arguments —"

"What am I supposed to do? Hold him for you?"

Ransom grinned. "You just back me up. He can take care of himself."

"But what do I know about Venus?"

"I'll tell you all there is to know about it before we get there." Ransom turned off the main highway into the mountain road that led to the observatory. "Venus. Twenty-six to 160,000,000 miles away. About 7700 miles in diameter. Got a year equal to 225 earth days, and maybe six or seven days of its own. Per year. Albedo — that's reflection ratio — 60 per cent. Temperature on its sunlit side 55 Centigrade. But that's only —"

"How about the other side?"

"Minus twenty — Now listen, MacTate." Ransom clashed the gears into second to take a hump in the road. "You can just stop being sarcastic. Those temperatures don't mean anything anyway, because they're only on the outside. Of the atmosphere. Underneath it's hotter."

"How do you know?"

"Because the atmosphere's mostly carbon dioxide. No water vapor. So —"

"But I distinctly remember reading in the encyclopedia —"

"Well, they've found out different. No water at all. So it's awful dry, and it's got big dust clouds all over that act like a greenhouse. You know. Catch the long wavelengths when they try to escape and keep them to heat the surface with. That's why you can't take pictures of it. The surface."

"Pictures?"

"Sure. You try to take pictures through a haze with ultraviolet waves, and all you get is the outside of the haze, because they're so short they lose their energy inside. But infrared waves are long enough to cut through most of the time and give you a picture."

"Except on Venus."

Ransom nodded. "On account of the atmosphere being so thick it traps them."

MacTate eyed him suspiciously. "And so what are you going to do about that?"

"Well —" Ransom grinned demurely. "Everybody's always tried to take pictures with the radiations coming *from* Venus. But we're going to shoot our own waves *at* it. Appleberry and me."

"But if the sun's rays can't get through the atmosphere —"

"Oh, the sun hasn't got our kind of rays." Ransom gave a little cough. "We ransomize them."

"What a shame."

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"No, no. It's a good thing." Ransom turned on the car lights. "As I was saying, the sun hasn't got quite our setup. We've got two atmospheres to contend with. Venus's and our own. If you use wavelengths under about two centimeters, the air eats them up, sort of. And if you use much longer ones, they slop all over the place and bounce off the ionosphere, like in radio. So you can't aim them right, any more than you can thread a needle if you hold the thread too far back from the end."

"Then why not just use two-centimeter waves?"

"Well, they're good enough to hit fairly close things. Like the moon. But Venus is different. A two-centimeter wave would spread out and lose its focus, you might say. Before it got there." Ransom leaned forward to squint up through the windshield. He gestured at the white gleam in the darkening sky. "Pretty far away. See? So we've got to use sharper waves."

"But how do you get them through the air?"

"By a ransomized conductor. Like I said." Ransom leaned back and settled himself comfortably behind the wheel. "Suppose you could run a wire up to the ionosphere and feed an electric current into it. What would you have? A bunch of molecular vibrations with electronic vibrations running over them. Right? So we shoot up a sort of a 'wire' of medium sized waves with ultra-high harmonics in it. The main wave bounces off the ionosphere, but the harmonics go on through."

"But what about the atmosphere on Venus?"

"Well —" Ransom took one hand off the wheel and scratched his nose. "That gets pretty technical. But if you wanted to oversimplify, you could say it's something like tying a string to a flashlight beam. All we do is change microwaves into ultrasonics. Or quantums into continuous waves. Same thing. You know if you take ultraviolet pictures of Venus, you can see clouds toward the outside of its atmosphere? Dust clouds. Well, we rigged up a super-spectroscope and found one with a lot of metallic ions in it. So we shoot our harmonics at this cloud, and it's dense enough to bounce them back again, but meanwhile they've put a little dent in it, you might say, and that makes ultrasonics — around 400,000 cycles — that go down to Venus, bounce back to the cloud and make a *new* dent in it that causes a measurable disturbance in the returning harmonics. See?" He turned up the side road that wound to the observatory.

MacTate looked at him. "Offhand, old boy, I'd say it wouldn't work."

"But my God, MacTate, it does work. What have I just been telling you? We've been doing it all week. The beam."

"Then if everything's been going smoothly, why do you need protection from Appleberry?"

"On account of things haven't been going that smooth." Ransom pulled

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up in front of the observatory and stopped the car. "Last couple of days we've been getting interference. Funny interruptions in the returning wave. And Appleberry swears my calculations aren't —" He looked around. "MacTate. Do you see another car?"

"No, old boy. Why?"

"Well, I guess he isn't here yet."

"Who? Appleberry?"

"No, no. *He's* here. I mean —"

Suddenly the front door of the observatory flew open in a burst of light silhouetting a diminutive figure.

"That you, Sonny? Where the hell you been?"

MacTate looked at Ransom with a wondering smile. "Not — ?"

"He means me." Ransom nodded. "I'm just a kid around here. Come on."

They got out of the car and went into the observatory. Appleberry, MacTate noticed, had the general appearance, and expression, of a decorticated snapping turtle. He led the way to his office and sat on a step ladder that stood beside a wall of book-filled shelves.

"More of them goddam gaps in your circuit, Sonny." He spun down a yo-yo and caught it again. With his other hand he reached for a tablet on the desk and looked at it. "I been counting them up, too. Make a regular pattern." He threw the tablet back on the desk, spun his yo-yo again and glared at his junior with red-rimmed eyes. "Can't tell me there ain't something wrong with your figuring."

Ransom picked up the tablet and held it out for MacTate to see over his shoulder. On it was written:

12-16-16, 12-16-16, 12-16-16, 12-16-16, 12-16-16, 12-16-16 — 14-1-1-1, 14-1-1-1, 14-1-1-1, 14-1-1-1, 14-1-1-1 —— 12-12-12-12-12-12-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-1-14-16-16 — 1-14-16-16, 1-14-16-16, 1-14-16-16, 1-14-16-16, 1-14-16-16.

"You've got three kinds of dashes here, Appleberry. What are they? Pauses?"

"A for effort, Sonny, but you flunk as usual. There was five kinds of pauses. Short between unit blinks, longer between numbers, twice as long where the commas come, two pretty long ones here and there, and a real long one in the middle." Appleberry spun his yo-yo with disgusted vehemence. "Goddam mathematician. Ought to have got an electric boy in to set it up."

"Looks like some sort of message, doesn't it?" said MacTate.

Ransom was scowling at Appleberry. "Listen, Appleberry. You find me an electronics man that —" He stopped and looked around at MacTate. "What did you say?"

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"Oh, nothing. I just remarked on its resemblance to a cipher."

"Cipher?" Ransom stared at him. "My God. You don't think it could be?" He looked down at the figures again.

"Of course not, Ransom. As Appleberry says, there's probably something wrong with your machinery."

"Couldn't be the alphabet," Ransom said thoughtfully. "I wonder —"

"Maybe it's notes for the harp," Appleberry said nastily. "Angels heard what a smart boy you was so they're giving you a correspondence lesson." He shot his yo-yo out horizontally.

"Appleberry." Ransom looked at him impatiently. "Would it be asking too much for you to put that damn thing away while I'm trying to —"

"Look, Sonny. Whose observatory is this, anyhow? One of these days that school system is going to wise up to theirselves about how to fix eligibility for a yo-yo contest, and if I don't stay in practice —"

"Listen." Ransom aimed a finger at him. "Speaking of yo-yos, did Elmo Mainboy show up here tonight? I looked for his car outside, but —"

"What's he look like?" Appleberry spun his yo-yo in slow verticals.

"Stuffy little fellow. Pink cheeks. And near-sighted. I guess he didn't —"

"Fellow like that showed up here couple hours ago." Appleberry nodded. "Come in a taxi. Said you promised him he could look through the telescope —"

"Well, my God, where is he?"

"How should I know? Think he went in the projection room, maybe." Appleberry swung his yo-yo with greater vehemence. "I told him to keep the hell out of my way. If you go making idiotic promises —"

"Listen, Appleberry. My God, I got him here to see *you*. He's probably got a contract for you to teach yo-yo at the school. Their old gym teacher quit, and he said he was going to see the school board about getting in several replacements to diversify the athletic program. *If* we let him look through the telescope."

Appleberry got up from the ladder. "Well, why didn't you tell me? How was I supposed to — ?"

"Come on." Ransom went to the door and opened it. "If he's still here, maybe we can smooth it over. But this time watch your manners, Appleberry." He led the way across the corridor and cautiously opened a door that said PROJECTION.

In the back row of the chairs facing the screen sat a little pink-cheeked man, with thick glasses and an aggrieved expression, twirling his hat petulantly between his knees.

"Elmo!" Ransom's tone was suggestive of transport. "Glad you could come. Sorry you got here too — er, sorry we were late. Appleberry." He

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beckoned. "Appleberry, meet Elmo Mainboy, *Principal* of the Susan B. Anthony Junior High School."

Elmo got up and regarded Appleberry sourly.

"How are you, Buster." Appleberry extended a claw, pulled it back to disengage the yo-yo, and seized Elmo's hand. "If I'd knew who you —"

"But I forgot to tell him you were coming, Elmo," said Ransom. "And since he's responsible for chasing — prowlers off the premises —" He laughed. "But he's really very friendly. Gets along well with dogs and *children*. Look, Elmo" — he clapped the little man on the shoulder and steered him to the door — "we've got something special for you to see tonight."

Appleberry slipped the yo-yo back on his finger and hopped it across the corridor, keeping one eye on Elmo.

"We've established wave contact with Venus," said Ransom, leading Elmo into Appleberry's office, "but there's funny gaps in the return signal. I'll show them to you on the scope." He picked up the tablet again. "See, they make a regular pattern. MacTate there thinks it might be some sort of a code. What kind did you have in mind, MacTate?" He winked at him. "Extraterrestrial interplanetary communication or something like that?"

MacTate smiled. "Perhaps it's invaders in flying saucers jamming your waves with their nefarious atomic contraptions."

Elmo stared at the tablet noncommittally.

Ransom frowned at him soberly. "Mustn't ever entirely discount that sort of thing, you know, Elmo. Science fiction frequently —" He stopped. "What did you say?" He looked at MacTate.

"I said perhaps interplanetary invaders are jamming you with their —"

"Atomic. Atomic what?" Ransom stared at the tablet. "Appleberry, get down a chemistry handbook."

Appleberry was standing directly in Elmo's line of vision doing things with his yo-yo. First the disc shot straight down from his right hand and stayed vibrating at the end of its string. Then his left hand constructed a triangle of that string, and somehow the yo-yo came back up and hung, swinging like a pendulum, inside the triangle. Elmo gaped. "Rocking the Baby," said Appleberry casually. "Easy tournament stuff."

Ransom ran his finger under the numbers on the tablet. "Look. How about atomic weights? Twelve would be carbon, sixteen oxygen. Approximately. Six parts of carbon dioxide and six of nitrogen trihydride — what's that? Ammonia. Six carbon dioxide plus six ammonia gives you $C_6H_{13}NO_2$ — whatever that is — plus five nitrous acid. Look. It's a formula. Appleberry, where's that chemistry book?"

Appleberry was absorbed in his exhibition for Elmo, who had begun to

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lose interest in Ransom's chemical calculations and was following the gyrations of the yo-yo with somewhat reluctant fascination. "Look at this one, Buster," said Appleberry. "Stick out your arm." Appleberry took up a professional stance some two feet from the extended arm of the puzzled Elmo. For a moment the yo-yo shot straight down and spun, then a quick movement of Appleberry's hand sent it out so that it dangled over Elmo's arm, nodding back and forth. "Elephant's Trunk," said Appleby. "Pretty advanced stuff, Buster." With a jerk he recalled the still-spinning yo-yo to his hand.

Ransom brushed impatiently past him and craned his neck at the wall of books behind the stepladder. "Industrial, physical, bio — Here. *Organic Chemistry*." He stood on his toes, took down a book and leafed through it. "Listen to this." He stuck out a foot in the path of Appleberry's yo-yo, which bounced off his shoe with a buzzing clonk.

"Hey. What the hell," said Appleberry.

"Put that thing away," said Ransom. "This is important. Listen." He put the book on the desk and pressed down the page. "Leucine, or amidohexoic acid, $C_6H_{13}NO_2$. A white crystalline substance, resembling cholesterol, which is formed by the decomposition of protein in pancreatic digestion and other biochemical processes. Leucine melts at 338°F decomposing simultaneously into amylene, carbon dioxide and ammonia. In normal digestive processes it is probably converted to urea and — so on. But look." He pointed at the tablet. "They've got it backwards. Instead of melting into carbon dioxide and ammonia they've got it *made* out of them."

Appleberry's leathery mouth twisted. "That's goddam stupid of them, Sonny. Now will you get the hell out of the way and let me show Buster here —"

"Ransom —" Elmo scowled at Appleberry and tapped Ransom's arm.

"I say, old boy," said MacTate, bending over the tablet with Ransom. "Supposing your theory to be correct, why couldn't this protein thing be made out of the carbon dioxide and ammonia? We shouldn't be misled by subjective analogies into —"

"Ransom —" said Elmo.

"Wait, Elmo." Ransom stared at MacTate. "You mean it's what *they're* made out of?"

MacTate regarded the numbers quizzically. "Well, I'm not sure I meant —"

"MacTate." Ransom's eyes gleamed. "You've got it. They inhale carbon dioxide and ammonia and exhale nitrous oxide, see. Probably got compression chambers for hearts. They use part of the ammonia to refrigerate their insides so the leucine can form, and then circulate it in a sort of blood system

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so it'll melt and release energy. I told you it was awful hot on Venus. Then they excrete the amylene and —"

"And throw it at each other," said Appleberry. "Sonny, you got the goddamdest imagination I ever come across." He shook his withered head. "But while you're playing games, do you think you could bring yourself to get out of the way so I can —"

"Ransom." Elmo tapped his arm again. "Could I —"

"All right, Appleberry." Ransom swung around and stuck out his little belly petulantly. "You know so much. *You* figure it out."

"I already told you I got it figured out." Appleberry moved to another corner of the office, somewhat oblique to Elmo's line of vision, and began to warm up his yo-yo again. "You got to spaceflying while you was setting up the circuits and set them up wrong. If you could get your mind off Venusian monsters long enough to take a look at the magnetrons, you might get somewhere. Meanwhile I'll be glad to entertain Buster here —"

"Appleberry might have a point there." MacTate looked at Ransom. "Why don't you simply reply to this so-called message and settle the matter? If an intelligent race is communicating with you, the gap pattern will change. If not, then you can examine the machinery as Appleberry suggests."

Ransom aimed a finger at him. "And in the reply we'll first repeat their formula to show them we get it. Then if they repeat ours —" He stopped. "But what's ours going to be?" He frowned thoughtfully and looked at Appleberry. "Appleberry, why couldn't you have been a chemist instead of a lousy comet-snapper?"

"Comet-snapper!" Appleberry shot out the yo-yo and grinned with vituperative delight. "Listen, Sonny, I was working differential equations in my head when you —"

"*Ransom*," said Elmo, tapping his arm desperately.

"Here, old boy." MacTate was looking at the chemistry book. "Why don't you show them how this leucine breaks down in us? The book says it turns into urea."

Ransom, who had begun to notice Elmo, turned around. "Into what?" He looked at the book. "Urea. Say. That's an idea." He scratched his nose. "Suppose we ate a — steak. Pancreas busts up the protein and you get leucine. Then that turns into — what's urea? CO" — he picked up the book and turned some pages — "N_2H_4. Subtract that from leucine — taking two parts on account of the N_2 — and what's left?" He grabbed a pencil and wrote the formulas on the tablet. "Two $C_6H_{15}NO_2$ minus CON_2H_4 gives you —" He scratched his head with the pencil. "Well, if you figured we swallowed four molecules of oxygen with the steak, it would give you eleven parts of formaldehyde."

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Appleberry spun his yo-yo in a wide swing which just missed Elmo's nose. "Man," he announced, "on the Flying Trapeze." Inevitably Elmo's eyes followed his pyrotechnical maneuver.

Appleberry's left forefinger glided swiftly up the string to a point at which the yo-yo turned, arced back over the finger, and unbelievably settled precisely on the string, riding up and down like an obsessed monorail car. "Formaldehyde!" he grunted, contemplating the yo-yo. "Nothing like a shot of formaldehyde with your meals."

"No, no, Appleberry," said Ransom. "My God, you don't *drink* it. It gets made in your digestive system."

"Are you sure?" MacTate looked dubiously at the formula. "I should think it would tend to preserve the subsequent bites of steak."

"Well," said Ransom, "you get formaldehyde in plants. Got to for photo-what-do-you-call-it."

"So let's pretend we're vegetables," said Appleberry, shooting his yo-yo at the ceiling. "Work it out like a goddam algebra problem. Who'll know the difference? Then you can get back to the magnetrons."

"Come along, old boy." MacTate went to the door. "Where do we send it?"

"Ransom," said Elmo as MacTate and Appleberry went out the door, "I want to tell you something."

Ransom turned around impatiently. "All right, Elmo. What's on your mind?"

"Ransom," said Elmo, "I don't want to look through any telescope under false pretenses. That man. Appleberry. He —"

"What do you mean, false pretenses?" said Ransom. "You've got a contract with you, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have it in my inner pocket." Elmo tapped the breast of his coat. "But that's what I mean. I can't possibly give this Appleberry a contract. It's not only his swearing, but the grammar he uses. And he — called me '*Buster*.'" He winced. "So if looking through the telescope is going to obligate me —"

"Why, Elmo." Ransom looked at him earnestly. "Didn't you know Appleberry reserves that word for people he's taken a liking to? 'Buster,' I mean. Look what he calls me. 'Sonny.' *That's* what he calls people he hasn't got much use for."

"Very well, but the other words he uses —"

"Reaction," said Ransom. "He keeps such a strict watch on his language when he's around — well, children, for instance — anybody outside, really — that when he's here in his den he just has to sort of let himself go. And you've seen yourself how awfully well qualified he is to teach yo-yo."

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"Yes, but —"

"Then what's all this about false pretenses?" Ransom laughed and clapped Elmo heartily on the shoulder. "You come up with us now, and I'll show you something much more fascinating than a telescope view. A real interplanetary message from Venus. How's that?"

"But I want it understood —"

"You just come and see, Elmo." Ransom pushed him through the door.

In a gauge-lined room upstairs Appleberry, squinting at the numbers on the tablet, was preparing to seat himself before a glowing screen when Ransom steered Elmo in.

"Appleberry. Get away from that scope." Ransom released Elmo and darted to the screen.

Appleberry glared at him vitriolically for an instant, then caught sight of Elmo. Throwing the tablet at Ransom, he took the yo-yo out of his pocket and began to warm up.

Ransom sat down before the screen, peered at the tablet and began to do things to a control panel.

"But, Ransom —" Elmo circled carefully around Appleberry and approached the panel.

"Shh. Not *now*, Elmo. I'm contacting Venus for you."

"Shall I call the numbers off, old boy?" MacTate looked over Ransom's shoulder and began to read them out loud.

Finally Ransom took his hand away from the panel. "There. We've repeated their formula and sent ours." He tore a sheet off the tablet, picked up a pencil and pointed at the line of light oscillating across the screen. "See. Beam's unbroken." He looked around at MacTate. "Do you suppose that means they got our —"

"Ransom," said Elmo, taking his eyes off the screen, "before anything really happens, I want you to understand —"

"Look." MacTate pointed at the screen. "It blinked."

Ransom whirled around to count the gaps in the line. ". . . ten . . . eleven . . . twelve . . . Stopped. That's carbon." He made a note on the tablet. "There they go again." He hunched forward and stared myopically at the screen, counting and making notes. At last he held up the tablet and waved it gleefully. "There you are. Two $C_6H_{13}NO_2$ plus four O_2 makes CON_2H_4 plus eleven CH_2O. They've repeated our formula."

Appleberry, who had stopped spinning his yo-yo to watch, stared at the screen. "I'll be a son of a bitch."

"You see, Appleberry." Ransom turned around. "Us kids know a thing or two, too. You can't —"

"There it goes again, old boy." MacTate pointed at the screen.

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Ransom whirled around again. "One . . . two . . . Stop. One . . . two . . . three . . . Stop. Long stop. One . . . Stop." He waited. "My God." He looked around. "That's all."

"Keep your eyes on the scope, Sonny." Appleberry uncurled a claw at it. ". . . eleven . . . twelve. Carbon. One . . . two —"

"All right, Appleberry. I'll do the counting." Ransom turned back to the screen and ticked off the gaps. "Two sixteens. Carbon dioxide. What do you suppose they —? There it is again." He continued to count. "Same thing over again. Two, three, one, carbon dioxide."

"Deuterium and tritium something hydrogen something carbon dioxide." Appleberry grinned malevolently. "That's one hell of a good code you're using, Sonny."

"Ransom," said Elmo, "regardless of whether your code works or not —"

"Do you suppose they're referring to something else this time?" MacTate pursed his lips. "Two from three equals one, for instance? To show us they're familiar with arithmetical procedures? But then why the carbon —?"

"No, no." Ransom shook his head. "Why would they turn it around? Sensible way to show that would be three *minus* two. But you're right it's got to be something else this time." He scowled at the screen. "What would both of us know about that goes two, three — Wait." He swung around. "What number's Venus in the planets? From the sun?" He jabbed a finger at MacTate. "And the Earth's three. But the one would be Mercury." He scowled at the tablet. "How does *that* —?"

"Hell, Sonny," said Appleberry. "Smart boy like you ought to be able to figure that out. They just mean they want to get together with us." He made his yo-yo hop derisively across the floor. "Two and three make one. It's a goddam love letter."

"Ransom," said Elmo, "regardless of whether you make physical contact with these people or not, I want it clearly understood —"

"Appleberry" — Ransom scowled at him — "if you could control your lively sense of humor —" He stopped. His eyes turned thoughtful. "MacTate. You don't think he *could* be right? Without meaning to?"

MacTate shrugged.

"Of course," said Ransom, "if they'd figured out a way to use our beam for — Listen. Appleberry's right. They want to come here." He got up. "That's why they added the carbon dioxide. Want us to fix it up so they can breathe. That's *got* to be it." He looked around the room. "What could we use for —?"

"Sonny, why don't you stop acting like a goddam —"

"Ransom," said Elmo, "if you would give me just one minute —"

"Listen, Appleberry." Ransom turned and jabbed a finger at him. "Was

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I right or not about the gaps being a message from an intelligent planet? Was I right or not about they would repeat our formula? Let's wait till I'm wrong once before we buck the theory. Now suppose *you* stop acting like a goddam fool and tell us where we can get some carbon dioxide."

"All right, Sonny." Appleberry snapped his yo-yo disdainfully. "You want to make a fool of yourself, I got some dry ice I keep — orange juice on. Down in the cellar."

"Now that's better —"

"But see here, old boy," said MacTate. "How would they be able to count the planets through that atmosphere of theirs? I thought —"

"Ransom —" said Elmo.

"That's right, MacTate." Ransom turned. "Now *you* start. How do I know how they counted them? The planets. Maybe they've got ransomized eyes or something. Let's get them here first, and then we can ask them." He scratched his nose thoughtfully. "Listen. There's a new glass boiler downstairs we can use. Come on, MacTate. Appleberry, you get the dry ice. Lots of it."

"Ransom." Elmo clutched him by the sleeve as the others went to the door. "I want you to understand that nothing I see with your theory will commit me to giving that yo-yo man a contract."

"What?" Ransom turned and bent disapproving brows upon him.

"I'll have to make a complete report to the school board before engaging him," Elmo said stubbornly. "If I —"

"Well now, I don't know, Elmo." Ransom scowled judiciously. "Seems to me you might say you're already committed a little. Isn't everybody we'd show the communication beam to, you know."

"I attempted to make my position clear," said Elmo. "Several times."

"But you did watch the scope, didn't you?"

"My conscience is clear on that matter, Ransom. I don't think you played fair with me. Saying he talked like that as a reaction. It sounds like a *habit* to me."

"But, Elmo. You don't think he'd talk that way around *children?*"

"I think he would talk that way around anybody."

MacTate, who had been waiting for Ransom at the door, came back into the room. "Something wrong, old boy?"

Ransom waved at Elmo. "He doesn't want to give Appleberry a yo-yo contract. Afraid he might cuss around the kids."

MacTate pursed his lips. "Why don't you put a clause in the contract forbidding him to?"

"But, MacTate," said Ransom, "that's like telling him not to —" He caught himself and looked apprehensively at Elmo.

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"There *is* a decent-behavior clause in the contract," said Elmo. "But I can't engage a person I'll have to release in ten seconds. Besides, if any of the board have ever met him —"

"Well then" — MacTate smiled — "simply insert a clause forbidding him to speak. On the job, of course. Doesn't have to, to demonstrate the yo-yo. Then you could wink at what few infractions he committed. There wouldn't be enough of them to accommodate — epithets."

"There you are, Elmo." Ransom clapped him on the shoulder. "All fixed up. Anyway, while we're downstairs with Appleberry, I'll mention your squeamishness to him, and you'll see whether it's a habit or not. His language." He grabbed MacTate's arm. "You wait here, Elmo. We'll be right back." He headed for the door.

"But, Ransom —" Elmo glared after them like a frustrated basilisk.

Ten minutes later Appleberry came back with a bucket full of dry ice.

"Merciful heavens, Bus — Elmo. They been keeping you here all by yourself?"

Elmo glared at him.

"Ought to be ashamed of their — themselves. Big shot like you. But they got their minds on this — frightful Venusian business." Appleberry set the bucket down and took the yo-yo out of his pocket. "You know something, B — Elmo? What they need in that school system of yours is a annual contest for all the physical ed teachers. Keep them in shape." He began to put his yo-yo through a series of spirals. "Loop the Loop," he said. "Beginner stuff, but it's all in how many times you can do it."

Elmo stared skeptically. "Hundreds of times?" he ventured.

Appleberry snorted. "Bu — Elmo, if you can't break a hundred your first week I'll be ashamed of you. World record's 1269; da — almost broke 1000 last week but some confounded kid bust in on me." The yo-yo continued imperturbably Looping the Loop. "Sixty," Appleberry noted. "Now take your yo-yo teachers, for instance. All over town. Get them together once in a while — let some of the smarter kids in it, too — and show them how — exhilaratingly much they still got to learn. Be glad to organize it my —"

"Avast, Appleberry." Ransom puffed through the door at the head of a large glass tank, with MacTate at the other end. They hauled it across the room and grunted it upright beside the control panel. Ransom began to manipulate some wires.

"Like I was saying, Elmo —" Appleberry looped on indefatigably.

"One hundred and twenty-five . . ." said Elmo with involuntary awe.

". . . twenty-seven," Appleberry corrected. "Now you let me organize this contest and I'll produce kids right out of your own junior high that can beat any teacher in the whole — unspeakable school system."

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In its 140's the yo-yo was beginning to veer from its rigid position. Elmo's hypnotized eyes followed its slight oscillation from side to side. Without losing the thread of his speech, Appleberry reasserted his control over the thread of the yo-yo. With a sharp flick he shot the disc straight up and out; when it resumed its lower spirals, the oscillation had vanished. "One fifty-five," said Appleberry. "Yo-yo's just about the best thing you can teach a kid anyway. Know that? Teaches them accuracy, timing, balance, honesty, cooperation, responsibility, initiative, inventiveness, poise, patience, courage, perseverence, loyalty" — he drew a breath — "and civic pride. In contests, that is."

While Appleberry's right hand continued to loop the yo-yo into the 170's, his left reached into a back pocket and produced a second yo-yo. Elmo gasped. Half crouching, Appleberry sent the left-hand yo-yo looping behind him while the other went on looping in front. The effect was dizzyingly like a full gallop to the accompaniment of the *William Tell* overture. "Riding the Horse," said Appleberry. "Takes everything I just said."

Across the room Ransom looked at MacTate. "Why'd he leave out chastity?"

MacTate smiled. "Possibly because it's not a virtue of slow growth."

Ransom wiped his hands on a rag. "It was with him, I'll bet." He looked up. "All right, Appleberry, Elmo. Here come the Venusians. Wait. What did you do with the dry ice, Appleberry?"

"In the bucket." Appleberry pointed with his toe. "Where the dickens did you think it was?"

"Well, bring it over. They're going to get tired of waiting."

Appleberry muttered something under his breath. ". . . cooperation . . . patience . . ." He put the yo-yos back in his pockets and brought the bucket over.

Ransom dumped the dry ice into the glass tank, which was upside down, clamped it shut and started a pump that he had attached by a hose to the cock. "Get the air out so it won't poison them," he said. The mist swirling up through the six-foot tube disappeared as the moist air was withdrawn.

"Now how do we let them know we're ready?" Ransom went to the control panel. "Repeat their message, I guess, and then a lot of CO_2's." He sent the message while the others watched the screen.

"Ransom," said Elmo, "I still —"

"Here." MacTate counted. "Two . . . three . . . one. They've replied." He pointed at the screen expectantly for a moment. "That's all. They must be on their way."

"You mean *it*," said Appleberry. "How many of them you figure can get in there?"

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Ransom looked at him. "My God, Appleberry. *Now* you think of that." He looked at the tank, which was growing curiously cloudy inside, as if it had admitted some moisture. "What if they're bigger than the boiler?"

"Honest to goodness, Sonny," said Appleberry. "You make me — ill. Talking as if something was really going to happen." He got out his yo-yo and gave it an exasperated spin.

"Do you think there's time to warn them?" Ransom turned to MacTate. "Do you think —?"

MacTate was staring at the tank.

"MacTate —" Ransom followed his gaze. "My God."

"Silliest g — ruesome stunt even you ever cooked up." Appleberry whipped his yo-yo viciously. "Ought to start growing up one of these days."

"MacTate," said Ransom in a hushed tone. "Do you see what I see?"

MacTate hesitated a moment. "Ordinarily, old boy, I'd reply affirmatively. But —"

"What is it from where you are?"

MacTate cleared his throat. "Appears to be a — young lady."

"Same here."

"Unclad?"

"Whew."

MacTate swallowed. "With — well, a coiffure of red hair?"

"No, no MacTate." Ransom pointed. "It's a little cloudy, but you can see the hair plain. She's a platinum blonde."

"Just as I feared, old boy. We're not seeing the same thing. But do you have the feeling that it's not entirely a *visual* —" Suddenly he started. "What's that?" He blinked. "Like a flash of light."

"What's wrong, MacTate?" Ransom laughed. "Sure you're not just catching a glimpse of *him?*" He pointed at Elmo.

Elmo, squinting desperately through his thick glasses, had turned a rich crimson.

"I wonder what kind he — Ouch." Ransom winced. "You're right, MacTate. I got it too. Seems to go right through your brain. I — Say." He was looking at the tank again. "You know, you might be right about the hair at that. It does look a little red."

"Funny," said MacTate. "Now it looks somewhat silvery to — See here, Ransom." He turned. "This is ridiculous. The thing's reading our minds." He pointed at the tank. "What are the chances of those leucine-refrigerators of yours turning out like — that?"

Ransom grinned. "Well, it did a good job of reading my mind."

"Of course. It's trying to ingratiate itself. But now that it's discovered

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our several ideals are somewhat different, it's trying to adjust. It —"

"My God." Ransom was staring at Appleberry. "If you're right, what's *he* looking at?"

Appleberry stood leaning slightly forward with a hideously sensual grin on his wizened mouth, as if he were drooling. The yo-yo dangled forgotten on the floor. His gnarled fingers were crooked possessively, and his watery eyes gleamed with unspoken goddams.

"Who does he think he's kidding?" said Ransom.

MacTate smiled. "Her, perhaps." He gestured at the tank.

Ransom looked at it. He scowled. "I've got a good mind to slip her a shot of oxygen. Scare her into her normal shape so she won't go making him show off like that."

"Hey. What the hell." Appleberry threw a hand up to his eyes.

"Now she's reading his mind," said Ransom. "Maybe that's as good as a shot of oxygen."

"But, old boy," said MacTate, "perhaps he sees only a super-yo-yo. If our visitor's object is to appeal to the dominant craving —"

"Goddamit, Sonny. Now look what you went and done." Appleberry pointed at the tank.

"Careful, Appleberry —" Ransom nodded warningly at Elmo.

"The hell with him." Appleberry sounded heartbroken. "You and your goddam oxygen. I heard you. You went and chased it away."

Ransom looked at the tank. It was transparent and empty. "No, no, Appleberry." He laughed blandly. "She's just adjusting. Probably takes a second."

"Old boy —" said MacTate.

"Wait, MacTate. I'll explain it to him. See, Appleberry, when she read your mind and —" He turned to Elmo. "Did she get to yours yet, Elmo?"

Elmo was still blushing. He squinted indignantly at Ransom. "I don't know what you mean by getting to me, Ransom, but I've seen enough to know that this is no place for a decent, self-respecting person to be."

Ransom was startled. "Why, Elmo —"

"I came here expecting to see a few stars through the telescope and engage a retired professor to teach yo-yo," Elmo went on, "and instead what do I find? A foul-mouthed old satyr leering at a scientifically disguised *peep* show."

"Now look, Elmo —"

"I pride myself on my broadmindedness — in fact the board considers me *too* tolerant much of the time — but obscenity is the *limit*." He gestured angrily at Appleberry. "You can let him use all the profanity he wants to. It won't make any difference. I've never been so thoroughly —"

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"Listen, Elmo." Ransom scowled. "That's no way to talk. We —"

"I don't care. You had no right to bring me out here just to —"

"*Bring* you here?" Ransom jabbed a finger at him. "You *came* here, Elmo. In your own taxi, remember? And speaking of peep shows, as you call them, just what did *you* see in that tank?"

Elmo, his mouth open to continue the tirade, stopped in mid-thought. "I —?"

"Yes. You. That Venusian didn't show you anything that wasn't already in your own mind, you know."

Elmo began to blush again.

Ransom's eyes narrowed. "Not that we'd say anything to the school board, of course, but I just wonder what they would think if they knew what went on in their principals' minds sometimes." He cleared his throat. "But you *are* lucky we're your friends. Now, you say you've got that contract with you?"

Elmo stared at him for a moment. "Ransom, you wouldn't dare."

"Dare what, Elmo?" Ransom widened his eyes innocently.

"Very well." Elmo reached into his inner breast pocket. "Very well." He took out the contract and threw it at Ransom. "But let that nasty old buzzard whisper just one little goddam, and I'll release him like that." He snapped his fingers. "Like that." He snapped them again and stalked to the door.

Ransom opened the contract. "Wait, Elmo. Is it signed?"

Elmo slammed the door.

Ransom saw the signature at the bottom of the paper and nodded with satisfaction. "Well, Appleberry, now you've got an honest-to-God job."

"Regular little fixit, ain't you," Appleberry snapped. "Now suppose you go get back that Venusian you threatened to poison."

"What are you talking about, Appleberry?" Ransom looked at the tank. "She —"

The tank was still empty.

"Where'd she go?"

"I tried to tell you, old boy," said MacTate. "She adjusted almost instantaneously. You weren't watching carefully before. So perhaps Appleberry's right. If she found you were thinking of oxygen —"

"But I didn't mean that," said Ransom. "About the oxygen. I was only — MacTate. You don't think she really took it seriously?" He looked at the empty tank. "Oh my God." He darted to the control panel. "We've got to get her back and explain. Maybe if I send the three, two, one again —"

"Ransom." MacTate grabbed his shoulder. "There on the screen. She's saying something."

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Ransom looked at it. "Where's the tablet?" He found it, seized a pencil and began to record the gaps: 25-15-21, 3-1-14, 20-1-11-5, 25-15-21-18, 7-15-4-4-1-13, 16-1-14-3-18-5-1-19, 1-14-4 — "Wait." He stopped counting and threw down the tablet. "This isn't a formula. She's sending us on a wild-goose chase to get even."

"That's sure as hell getting even," said Appleberry, winding up his yo-yo. "You try to poison it and it pulls your leg."

"I *didn't* try —"

"Look here, old boy." MacTate was studying the numbers on the tablet. "Do you think it could be an alphabet or something of the sort this time? It read our minds, you know."

Ransom stared at the numbers. "My God, you're right." He began to count on his fingers. "Look. The first word's *you*. Regular alphabet." He wrote down the other letters. "Says, *You can take your goddam pancreas and* — That's as far as I —" Suddenly he swung around to face Appleberry. "Appleberry. What's this about a pancreas?"

"How should I know?"

"This message is for you. You're the last mind she read." Ransom got up and advanced on him. "Listen. What did you see in that tank?"

"None of your business."

"Appleberry" — Ransom aimed a wrathful finger at him — "if you don't tell me what you saw, I'll — take the Board of Trustees a sample of that 'orange juice' you keep here."

Appleberry laughed harshly. "You will in a pig's eye, Sonny. Who the hell you think you're talking to? Elmo?" He looked at the door. "You know, you were pretty mean to that boy. He's probably walking down the hill to catch the bus. Let's go pick him up and take him to a —"

"Don't change the subject, Appleberry." Ransom held up the contract. "So help me, you start talking or I'll tear up your yo-yo job."

"All right, if it means so goddam much to you." Appleberry waved impatiently. "See, I been hungry for years and years. Can't eat anything but crackers and orange juice — doctored a little, maybe, but orange juice — on account of I'm so goddam old. So when that Venusian seductress of yours come down to the tank, all I could see was a gorgeous, tender, juicy" — he sighed — "steak, smothered in onions. Wasn't just visual. It —"

"Steak?" Ransom looked at MacTate. "Wait. That's how we figured out our formula. Remember? Steak breaks down into leucine when the pancreas — Oh my God." He sank into the chair in front of the screen, on which a bright line oscillated without interruption. "*That's* what happened. We sent her a digestive process. Instead of showing her how to make something, we showed her what happened to the stuff she was made out of when we got

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hold of it. And when she read Appleberry's mind, it dawned on her what our formula meant. She got a picture of herself getting worked over by his pancreas. She — thought he wanted to eat her."

MacTate looked at Appleberry's throwing arm. "And the yo-yo. A hunting implement?"

Appleberry got a faraway look in his eyes. "Well, I did want to. Only it ought to known I couldn't."

"You could have come a lot closer to it than —" Ransom sighed. "If only you were about 80 years younger. Oh well." He switched off the screen and got up. "Let's pick up Elmo and get something to eat, Appleberry. We'll buy you a glass of orange juice and let you watch us digest a steak. A big one. Smothered in onions."

Remember "One in Three Hundred"?

We're sure you do. J. T. McIntosh's novelet of the terrible problems of choosing one potential survivor out of every three hundred inhabitants of a threatened Earth (which appeared in the February, 1953, issue of F&SF) was, to judge by your letters, one of the most memorable stories we've published. Next month Mr. McIntosh offers a long and exciting sequel, *One in a Thousand*, the story of a handful of people in a jerry-built spaceship, with the odds 100-to-1 against their reaching another planet in safety. We think you'll find this as memorable as its predecessor — not "space opera," but a pure story of spaceflight in terms of the interaction of sharply drawn human beings.

This January issue, on the stands in early December, will also present a unique item of science-fiction-for-Christmas by Raymond E. Banks, stories by J. B. Priestley, Robert Abernathy, Philip K. Dick and others, and our first special non-fiction feature: a detailed analysis of Charles Fort, the man, and a fresh look at his work by Miriam Allen deFord, whose unparalleled firsthand knowledge of her subject is revealed in many hitherto unpublished details, including excerpts from Fort's highly characteristic letters.

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Recommended Reading

by THE EDITORS

THE NEWS of the month — and indeed, for many readers, the news of the year — is the publication of Ray Bradbury's longest work to date: FAHRENHEIT 451 (Ballantine, hardcover $2.50, paper 35¢), an expansion to 50,000 words of his *Galaxy* novella of half that length, *The Fireman.* There's not much doubt that the intellectuals who have discovered Bradbury (but not Ward Moore or Theodore Sturgeon or Robert A. Heinlein or Fritz Leiber) as Literature will acclaim this work enthusiastically; but we're uncertain as to the reaction of the regular science fiction reader. Frankly, we're even a little uncertain as to our own reactions.

We *are* certain that, although the story is set in a highly mechanized future civilization, it is not science fiction, and that, despite its length, it is not a novel.

Bradbury's future here, as in most of his shorter works, is not a self-consistent probable world logically developed from specific premises, in the tradition of Wells, Leiber, Kornbluth, Heinlein or even Huxley. It is more closely related to the creations of Franz Kafka — a world which is at once an irrational nightmare and a direct symbol of our own contemporary existence. Belief (or in the familiar but valuable phrase, suspension of disbelief) in such a world is not an intellectual conviction enforced by the author's persuasiveness, but an act of faith imposed (if at all) by the sheer power of his writing.

The texture, again as in the shorter works, is woven of symbols rather than characters — a method that can, as we know, be strikingly effective in 5,000 words, but may leave you feeling that 50,000 seems pretty empty without the creation or development of a recognizable human individual.

Most readers probably know the short version: the story of the firemen of the future whose profession consists of burning books, and of the one fireman who rebels. The story is the same here; it has not been expanded so much as simply padded, occasionally with startlingly ingenious gimmickry (such as the four-wall TV rooms), often with coruscating cascades of verbal brilliance . . . and too often merely with words.

We're in agreement with Mr. Bradbury that certain current cultural trends are deplorable (though we think he manages to overlook or misinterpret a good many other aspects of contemporary culture), but we don't

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see that he has anything to say here that he has not said more sharply before at one-tenth or one-twentieth the length. But any Bradbury work, even as questionable a one as this, is of interest and even importance to all those interested in imaginative writing. So we suppose this volume (which also includes two shorter stories, one good, one flat) must be "recommended reading" — and you may well disagree violently with our comments on it.

It's good news that Bradbury's THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES have now been published, in England only (London: Science Fiction Book Club, 6 shillings), in a new "definitive" edition, omitting one weak story and inserting in its proper place one of the most memorable of all the chronicles, *The Wilderness* (in the version especially revised for F&SF, November, 1952). Specialist collectors will wish to order this from their import dealers, and others may hope that this final form of Bradbury's best book to date may soon appear in this country.

A most desirable reissue is that of Fritz Leiber's CONJURE WIFE, hitherto available only in an otherwise weak omnibus, as a book by itself (Twayne, $2.75); you'll be hard put to it to find a better blend of witchcraft, science and psychological suspense. A similar blend of science-fantasy with the suspense thriller is attempted by Sam Merwin, Jr., in KILLER TO COME (Abelard, $2.75), with but far less success; a good idea (time travelers who for their own purposes stimulate or retard human geniuses) gets lost in an awkward clump of first-draft writing and plotting.

Traditionally, we should not review a book a major part of which has appeared in these pages, but we must at any rate call your attention (and most urgently) to TALES FROM GAVAGAN'S BAR by Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp (Twayne, $3). The volume contains 23 stories, 9 from F&SF, 12 never before published anywhere. To our taste, they're even better *en masse* than they have been individually; and the illustrations by Inga (Mrs. Pratt) are at least as delightful as the tales.

As a solo, Mr. de Camp offers SCIENCE-FICTION HANDBOOK; THE WRITING OF IMAGINATIVE FICTION (Hermitage, $3.50), a down-to-earth study of s f, not as a Way of Life or a New Trend in Literature, but simply as a means of commercial entertainment. The magazine field changes so rapidly that the market information is already seriously outdated, and a number of minor errors of fact convince one (somewhat to one's relief) that de Camp can be fallible after all; but the solid sensibility of the whole, enlivened by skillful parody of common flaws and by an eerily accurate series of sketches of leading writers and editors, makes this not merely a textbook for writers but a useful (and entertaining) guide for the general reader.

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Since Jack London's great THE STAR ROVER *was published in 1915 (and why doesn't someone reprint it?) few fantasies have dealt with prison life. Perhaps this is because even the most perceptive writers regard the "big house" and its inherently cruel way of life as a stage for realistic drama only. Here, then, is indeed a rarity: a story of pure fantasy that has its being in the bitter world of the state penitentiary. It is the touching account of a young convict who discovered how to reach out beyond his bars and bring back into his cell the true reality of love and beauty.*

The Dream Dust Factory

by WILLIAM LINDSAY GRESHAM

I DON'T KNOW if you ever tried to crawl through a drainpipe sixteen inches square but if you never did, don't try. Unless you're built slim like me. I had to take the chance because that pipe was the only way out of Coulterville Pen, and I had to get out or beat my brains against the bars like a bluejay I caught when I was a kid.

I started a tunnel under the floor of the paint shack and it took me six months before I got down twelve feet to the main pipe of the old prison building. It had been forgotten over the years. I broke into it with a piece of iron sawed from a cot. Then I waited for a rainy day. If you're thinking about a crush-out you want to wait for fog but rain will do. After the noon mess I started. With luck they wouldn't miss me before the count at quitting time.

There was some 200 feet of pipe between me and Ross Creek and I wasn't sure there wouldn't be a grating over the pipe mouth. I had to take that chance.

In the dark I inched my way along, rapping the metal bar against the clammy sides of the pipe to scare any water snakes that might have holed up in there. Once something wriggled out from under my hand and I started to laugh and the laughter came booming and shrieking back at me in a sort of echo.

Then I got to something I didn't know about — an elbow in the pipe. I stopped dragging myself along and began to cry. You see, there was no

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way back and if I got stuck I didn't think Warden Brady would rip up half the prison yard just to keep me from starving to death in there. I figured he would just fill in the tunnel, when he found it, and fix up the books somehow to account for another inmate being dead.

Lying there, half inside the elbow, I could feel the muck squash under my chest. My eyes were burning with the slime and the tears washed them clean and that was one on my side. You get to be grateful for little things like that.

I began to cuss my old man and think about my mother. He was my stepfather and I guess he meant all right but he had a high temper. It came back to me like a picture on a movie screen — Ma was in bed with a headache. She always had to have the blinds pulled down because the light hurt her. I was sitting in the kitchen reading. I was a big kid, going on seventeen. I'd done my chores so the old man hadn't any real kick coming; he just came in feeling mean.

The book I was reading was one of Ma's, called *Phantastes* by a fellow named MacDonald. It was an old book with a green cover and the name in gold letters with a lot of curley-cues. The back was pretty near off it, Ma and me had read it so much.

First thing I knew the book was snatched away from me and I saw the old man standing there. He was breathing hard through his nose. He didn't say a word, just took the book and with his other hand grabbed for the stove plate lifter.

I got burned some, reaching into the stove before he yanked me out and began giving me the open hand, first one side of my face and then the other. I was built light and I couldn't budge him. He cut my lip. It didn't amount to nothing but I knew right then and there what I was going to do.

That night late Ma came into my room, not making any noise. I made believe I was asleep. She bent down and kissed me and then she smoothed back my hair and I wanted to jump up and grab a hold of her but I didn't. I was planning to cut out of there, you see, and I knew if she talked to me I would never make it.

I waited until both of them were asleep and then I didn't leave a note or anything. I had a valentine some girl from school had stuck in our mailbox and I left it under my pillow where Ma would find it in the morning and then I was off. The sky had never seemed so full of stars and them so far away.

I heard a freight whistle up the line and I headed for it, cutting across fields in the dark and snagging my pants on barbed wire plenty but I didn't care.

I had been on the go ever since — until I landed in Coulterville Pen.

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When I stopped dreaming and had got some of my wind back I reached ahead of me in the dark and felt around as far as I could and I found a ridge where the elbow fitted on to the pipe. I grabbed that little rim with my fingers and somehow, by digging with my toes to push from behind, I managed to worm my way through the elbow. There, ahead of me in the black, was a little gray spot of light.

I had to hurry because I knew one of the screws or a fink would find that tunnel under the paint shack and they'd have the prison siren blowing its brains out in no time.

I inched along, the spot of light getting bigger all the time and my ears stopped ringing because the air was getting better, the closer I got to the pipe mouth.

Finally I reached out and grabbed the edges and pulled myself right into the creek. It was muddy and roaring with spring rain. I lay in the shallows for a minute, letting the icy water wash the muck off me. Then somebody spoke from the bank over my head.

"Don't try to swim for it. We've got a launch out there waiting to pick you up." Warden Brady's voice. "Wash that slime off you, then turn and face me. Drop that iron bar."

I was so tired I hardly cared.

There had been an old blue-print kicking around the prison population of that stir for years. It had been stolen from the record room, probably before I was born. Nobody had ever tried a crush-out through that drain, though. And now nobody would ever get another chance. That was all I thought about while they were taking me back.

I was marched down into the "hole" under the old prison and pushed into a cell. For a long time nobody showed up at all. No food and no water. The floor was studded with rivets and I couldn't sleep more than a few minutes at a time.

When they finally came for me it was Brady and a couple of big screws who worked in the solitary block. Brady started trying to find out where I had learned the layout of the drains and I had a hard time not telling him. In the end they locked me up again and went away.

I began trying to dope out another way of beating the stir but I couldn't put my mind to it. My mouth was dry and I kept slipping into all kinds of crazy dreams. It felt like they had turned on the heat down there and then suddenly it was ice cold and I was shivering so I could hear my teeth rattle. Every now and then I would get a flash of memory — things that happened long ago — and one kept coming back and back as if it was trying to tell me something.

It was the picture of a little valley I discovered when I was a kid, a couple

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of ridges beyond our farm. I called it Happy Valley because I first found it in the spring of the year with the trees all slow green and the crocuses coming up golden under them. It seemed like nobody could ever be anything but happy in that valley and that's why I named it.

It was a great place to run off to when things got steamed up at home. I went back to it year after year. In winter you would think the whole world was shut out, as if a big cold frame had been dropped over the valley, the sky pressing down so gray and close with more snow coming; it was so still you could hear your own heart working. Once I flushed a partridge there and the boom it made, shooting up out of the snow, sounded as loud as a cannon.

Well, a picture of this valley began coming back to me and I tried to hold on to it. After a while I didn't feel the rivets any more. "This is pretty good," I said to myself. "I'll just camp here for a while in the valley." And it worked fine for what I judged was a night and part of the next day.

Sometimes it was winter in the valley and sometimes it was summer. Then I let the year roll over it, quiet and slow, watching the leaves come out and the grass get high; then the sky got a deeper blue, the leaves turned and the valley was all gold and red with the fall of the year.

As I watched it, the first snow came and then more until it was all soft white with nothing breathing or moving except maybe an owl out hunting when the night was settling down.

The next time they came for me and started asking questions about that drainpipe layout I was ready for them. I was determined to hang onto the valley as long as I could. They started to work me over and I hung on tight to the valley. I got so I could crawl right out of my skin and slide into one grass blade, standing there in the early summer light. I don't know how to tell it any better than that, what I did.

I could feel the strap fetch me a lick across my shoulders and something go off in the back of my head like a firecracker but there I was, safe and sound, inside the grass blade. It always had to be something little.

Once I slipped out of the grass and then it was tough for a while; I lost the valley and had nothing but the table top. When I lifted my head I saw that my lip had been bleeding in a little puddle. I had bit it without knowing.

I hoped they'd get tired soon and put me back into the cell because I didn't want to rat on the fellow who had given me that blueprint.

When they did get tired and I was safe back in the cell I just curled up and fell asleep. After that I got so I could shift in my sleep and give the rivets a fresh place to work on without waking up much.

The warden threatened to keep me down in the hole for the rest of my

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life but I stayed clammed up and in the end they took me out and gave me a hot shower and a shave and issued me clothes and I was taken over to Cell Block 9 which is the solitary block where they keep all the hard cases — guys that get caught with shivs in their shoes and guys that start fights. This was all right with me because I wasn't in any shape to work then anyhow and I didn't mind not having mail privileges — Ma was dead a few years back; nobody ever wrote to me except a couple of girls I had met in lunchrooms and that kind always get married and quit writing anyhow.

The valley kept me busy a long time. But at last it wore out and I began to get scared again until I thought of a pet bluejay I used to have. Not the one that beat his brains out but another one. This fellow I caught when he was young and had fallen out of his nest. I kept him in the barn and fed him on scraps. He tamed up nice and would ride around on my shoulder and I called him Smarty because he was an awful sassy customer and used to talk back to me a lot while I petted him. In the end a cat caught him. She come bringing him into the house, proud as could be, but Ma took Smarty away from her and the two of us buried him out under an apple tree.

Ma said, "He'll always be here, son. He's part of the tree, now. When the blossoms come out next spring I'll bet you'll hear him scolding away as the wind goes by." And that's the way it was, too.

So now I began to think about Smarty and it was just like the cat hadn't got him at all. I could sit on my bunk and make believe I had him with me, perched on my shoulder, and then I would send the make believe down into my fingers until I could feel the soft feathers of his back. I recalled the way he'd stretch out one wing and fix his feathers with his beak and then hop down and look at me, first with one eye and then with the other. The way I saw him now his feathers were brighter blue than they had been for real. He would hop all around the cell and flutter between the bars and I could lean against them and see him flying back and forth and roosting on the bars of the windows across the cell block. Then I'd whistle real soft and he'd come back to me.

About that time Dreamy O'Donnell, an old trusty, was given a job helping out in the office where they keep the records of fellows that go stir simple. One day the doctor sent for me and the screws took me to the office and the doc asked me a lot of questions. I wasn't sassy or anything but I kept thinking about the bluejay and smiling to myself because I could see him, sitting on my shoulder, giving little soft pecks at my ear, and they couldn't.

Once when the doc was called to the phone the old man whispered to me, "Nice going kid. You rode out the storm in fine shape. You're regular."

I just smiled at him. It seemed a long time ago — that business with the

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pipe and me getting the shellacking. It was O'Donnell that gave me that blueprint, you see — he was too old and worn out to use it himself. But I hadn't ratted on him.

The old man was still whispering out of the side of his mouth, ". . . says you're over the line. But I told him any kid that could go through that pipe was a long way from being stir bugs."

"I've got a bluejay," I told him, out of the side of my mouth. "He rides on my shoulder. Nobody can see him excepting me."

O'Donnell's face lit up. "No kidding! Say, you've found it all by yourself — the only real way out of this stir. I gave up the crush-out ideas years ago. What you've been working is what cons call the Dream Dust Factory. Ain't nothing you can't have in stir, son, if you want it bad enough. You build it out of Dream Dust, inside your head. Only there's one thing you musn't never make . . ."

The doc came hustling back right then and I didn't learn what the old man was going to tell me only I didn't care much. I wanted to get back to my cell.

Outside the windows of the corridor summer days were getting shorter. The light on the wall across the yard looked different and the prison smelled like autumn — fresh-painted steam pipes.

In Cell Block 9 they didn't allow us magazines or papers but I didn't need any. I could see all the pictures I wanted right inside my head — built out of Dream Dust, like the old guy said.

After a while I got tired of the bluejay; he was always around, pestering me to pet him. He would wake me up in the morning, pecking gently at the blanket over my face, and I would push him away and he would fly up to the cell bars and scold me for not getting up. I decided to fade him out but it took a long time until he was really gone.

Before I knew it the winter was over and the air coming through the windows across the block smelled like spring. That's the toughest time in stir — when you can smell the spring. I began remembering girls I'd met on the road; not real road sisters, because they are pretty tough, but girls on farms where I had dinged the back door for a meal, and girls in hash ints. There was one girl I'd been so stuck on I got a job washing dishes for of weeks until she started going out with a fellow who had a car. nembering her was what really started me working the Dream tory for fair. I wondered then why I had never thought of this Maybe it was because I was scared of it — scared it wouldn't n I would be up the creek with nothing to hang on to.

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and I could see it fine with my eyes shut but when I opened them it faded away. I didn't really think it could happen to me and to work the Dream Dust Factory you've got to believe that it can't fail.

Nights were the noisiest time in Cell Block 9 because that part of the prison population are restless sleepers, having dreams and cussing or waking up yelling and bringing the night shift screw down to tell them to shut up.

But one night I was lying there in the dark, listening to the fellow in the next cell coughing. I was just dropping off when I heard a voice, clear as could be. It was a girl's voice, right down close to me, speaking low. I couldn't make out the words very clear, just part of one sentence: ". . . come to you. Don't worry." And with that I waited to see if there was any more. There wasn't but I turned over and went to sleep happy.

The first time I saw her was at night. There's something about night that makes it easier. She was just a shadow — that first time — between me and the bars of the cell front. I saw her with my eyes shut and then when I opend them, real, real slow, I could see her shadow. She seemed to be wearing a pair of denim pants, just like prison pants, rolled up above her knees; she had on a man's shirt that was too big for her, with the sleeves rolled up, and there in the dark I could only see her shadow but I thought her bare arms, as she stood with her hands in her pockets, were the sweetest thing I ever saw in my life. Her hair was long; it hung to her shoulders and even though I couldn't make out her face I knew she wasn't smiling. The tears started slipping out and down my face because she had come to me at last.

The next time I opened my eyes she was fading; I could see the bars through her. I knew that the Dream Dust takes a lot of time, but time was something I had. I had all the time in the world.

It's funny, in stir, how the days crawl by so slow and yet the months go sailing over your head if you don't count them. I gave up thinking about the seasons outside. Where I was now it was mostly summer and out of Dream Dust I made trees — big ones, growing close, with their leaves meeting overhead. In the dim light there was a little creek flowing over stones and in the willows were blackbirds, nesting — there and in the rushes. Sitting beside the stream on a smooth flat rock, I brought her back. I could hear the water over the stones, chuckling to itself. The wind came through, stirring the willows, and there, with my eyes wide open, was the one I waited for. She parted the branches and stepped out on the rock and I saw her face, just as clear as could be.

She had a wide mouth that was red without having a lot of paint on and her eyes were brown, under the golden hair. She looked at me, sm to herself, waiting for me to speak to her. I reached up and took h

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But remembering her was what really started me working the Dream Dust Factory for fair. I wondered then why I had never thought of this one before. Maybe it was because I was scared of it — scared it wouldn't work and then I would be up the creek with nothing to hang on to.

I began building out of Dream Dust, over and over, shaping it up inside my head and trying to see what I had made. It got clearer and brighter

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the hand, drawing her down to the rock beside me; her hand was warm and sweet. Then I leaned over and her lips were firm and real. She had a modest way of kissing that went through me so I wanted to cry, and yet she didn't draw away from me, either.

"What's your name?" I whispered, and she put her lips close to my ear and whispered back, "Vida."

It wasn't like I had given her a name. She told it to me, all by herself, and I knew that this was the Dream Dust all the way. I had a little Mex girl once down in El Paso who taught me some Spanish but all I remembered of it now was that "Vida" means "life."

Sometimes we sat on the rock under the willows, and sometimes it was a wide, white beach with the sun beating down and a cool wind sliding over us. Vida lay with her head on my arm, her eyes closed, feeling the sun warm us when the wind quit blowing every now and then. Her bathing suit was made of some kind of cloth I had never seen for real — the colors in it shifted and changed like in a sunset. She would turn and bend over me and let her hair fall down on each side of my face. It was like a little room with the light coming through it as she kissed me.

Whenever something would pull at me and bring me back to the cell in Block 9 I kept my temper and waited until I could get to her again and as time went on, getting back to her got easier and easier.

When the lights in the block went out at night she was always there; she would slip under the blankets and put her arms around me: feeling her hands on my back and shoulders was like satisfying a great hunger, somehow. And when I would wake up during the night she was still there, breathing slow and deep as she slept; kissing took a little while to wake her but then she would kiss back and maybe whisper something to me and it was all in the cell. But it was fine.

I could see the bars, dim in the light that filtered in from the windows across the way; I could feel the blankets that covered us, but Vida was there with me and I didn't ask for any more. She was life; I had found her and never doubted that she would stick by me.

Sometimes when we couldn't sleep I'd change the cell with Dream Dust; it would be a boat out alone in the middle of a big river, all quiet under a million stars, the new moon riding with us and a soft wind blowing over the water. It was always warm on the river and we would drop over the side and swim a little ways, Vida's hair darkening in the starlight when it was wet. I would swim after her and she would turn, treading water until I reached her; then we would be together and let the water close over our heads; we would kiss in the darkness with the water all around us until we had to let go and swim up for air.

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In the boat were towels and dry clothes and Vida would press the water from her hair and tie one of the little towels around her head like a turban; then we would drift again with the same blanket around us, sweet and close, feeling the night wind cool on our lips after we had kissed. Vida's eyes were big and dark in the light of the new moon and all the summer stars. We would fall asleep in the boat, and when morning came I would hear the guard's whistle and kiss Vida and she would step out of the bunk and stand there, making a face toward the end of the block where the screw had sounded his whistle. Then she would blow me a kiss and walk past the head of the bunk. When I turned she would be gone.

Once the fellow who marched on my right in the file came down sick and there was a blank file beside me as we marched to the mess hall. But halfway there I felt someone next to me and there she was. She had on prison denims that were cut to fit her and her hair was caught up under her cap. She slid her hand into mine and I closed mine on her fingers, holding my hand so nobody would notice anything. That morning she sat beside me at the table and whispered to me all during breakfast, mostly little jokes about the screws up on the balcony of the mess hall. I couldn't keep from laughing a couple of times, quietly, to myself.

And then, in the middle of all this — when I had everything a man could want in this world — I get sent for one morning to come to the warden's office. I thought he was still after that blueprint of the drains and I smiled to myself because if they took me down into the tank and worked me over I knew Vida would be there, holding my face between her hands while I got my licking, and I knew it would be all right.

The warden started to say something but I didn't pay much attention. I had better things to think about and I just smiled a little. Then suddenly his voice cut through to me:

". . . this other fellow was picked up, pulling a gas station heist with the same *modus operandi* used in the case for which you were convicted. The resemblance is one of the most uncanny things I have ever seen. . . ."

It didn't seem very important to me and I tried not to listen but he put two cards in front of me and I saw that they both had pictures of me. Only the fingerprints were different.

The room cleared and I picked up the cards and looked at them again. The warden went on, ". . . you'll probably sue the state for false arrest and imprisonment. If you're smart, you won't hold any grudges toward this institution or its administration. Let bygones be bygones. You'll get a good job out of it, I'll see to that. You're a bright lad. You'll be okay. No hard feelings, eh?"

I couldn't quite figure it. They gave me a suit and shoes and a full outfit,

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even a tie and an overcoat. It was spring and still cold in the evenings. The screws chipped in and gave me some dough and the warden doubled it. But it was all sour. Guys went about asking me questions and in the office of the prison psychiatrist the doc filled out a lot of forms, with Dreamy O'Donnell grinning over his shoulder at me. Then I was on the platform of a railroad station, holding a ticket. I didn't want to be there. I began to cry.

A train came along and I got on it and the screw told me it didn't go where this ticket said I was going which was the town where the job was. Only the screw wasn't a screw, he was the conductor.

I got off again and while I was waiting I walked out of the station and saw a bus and I got on it and paid the driver. But I didn't know where it was going. I wanted Vida to hurry back and tell me where we were because she always knew where we were. But she didn't come.

I got off the bus in a town and I saw a hotel and went in and they wanted me to pay in advance. It was all right by me. The clerk came running after me and handed me some change. I stuck it into my coat pocket without bothering to count it, I was in such a hurry to get to the room and be by myself. I started up the stairs, only the kid who had the key said we'd better take the elevator.

I wanted to be by myself and find Vida and then everything would be swell.

When I got in the room I drew down the shades so it would be nice and dark, peeled off my clothes and slid into the bed, pulling up the sheet until it covered my face. Then I whispered to her, "Vida, Vida. Come on, darling." But nothing happened. I waited, listening to a big clock somewhere outside knock off the hours.

I stayed there in the bed until it was night, then I got dressed and went out, looking at the lights in the stores. Once I thought I saw her but it was just one of these figures of girls they have in store windows, wearing a playsuit something like one I'd seen on Vida. It wasn't Vida even though I stood and stared at it, trying to throw enough Dream Dust around it to make it come alive. I knew if she came alive she could slip through the glass and come to me. Only I couldn't work it at all this time. I thought maybe it was because I was hungry.

I had coffee with cream and lots of sugar and then I had some more and the girl behind the counter kidded with me a little but I answered her with only half my mind.

I had this money they had given me and I lived on it until it was gone; then I found myself walking toward the freight yards. A string of empties was pulling out and I found a refrigerator car. My arms were weak, so

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weak I could hardly make the top. It wasn't sealed and I crawled down inside, hoping Vida might be in there. But she wasn't. After a lot of backing and jolting we were some place else and I climbed out and cut down a country road and hit a farm house for a meal. I don't know yet what it was I ate or who gave it to me or whether I even thanked them for it.

But I looked around while I was heading toward the highway and I thought it looked familiar. It wasn't far from the old place — maybe thirty miles. Then I knew where I might find her — in Happy Valley. I started thumbing but nobody picked me up. And I couldn't walk much because my feet were soft and the shoes had begun to gall me.

There was a car parked in a side road; whoever left it there had forgotten to take the keys. I just wanted it for the short trip and I knew the state cops would find it as soon as I left it. I didn't think whoever had left it needed it as much as I did right then. It was the first time in my life I'd ever swiped anything and I wasn't going to sell it, you see. I just needed it to get to Happy Valley and Vida.

I let the clutch out too fast and nearly piled it up against a telephone pole but I got it going at last and then I rammed my foot down on the gas and let her fly.

I parked the car on the old timber road and set off straight up the side of the ridge, stopping to rest and get my breath every little while. I went as fast as I could which wasn't very fast because I was out of condition. Finally I got to the top.

The valley was gone.

That is, the Happy Valley I knew. It had been logged over, was nothing but stumps and spindly second-growth. It looked dead and naked. This was the end of the road, all right, because Vida would never come to me now, not in any place as empty and wide and ugly as this. I lay down and just about died. Only I didn't die. I just wanted to.

I went back to the car. The light was fading, but the night wasn't friendly any more. There was no place.

I thought I might as well take the car back again because I hadn't found Vida and it didn't matter now where I went once I had the car back, so I drove slow. There was a weight pressing on my shoulders and I felt like something was mashing me to death.

I was almost there when I heard a siren behind me and I fed her the gas to try and get back in time — the state cops had spotted the license of the car and I wanted to get away from them. But they slid up alongside me. Then I saw the side road where the car had been and I turned left into it. Or I started to. That's all I remember.

There was a hospital and I was handcuffed to the bed. I heard talk — it

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seemed one of the cops who had been chasing me was dead in the same crash that knocked me out but I was too miserable to listen any more.

The jail wasn't like Coulterville. Besides, I had a broken collarbone. It kept aching under the cast and then itching and I couldn't fix my mind on anything.

The court didn't seem real, or the lawyers, or the judge — nothing seemed real. The train trip was all a dream. Until I saw the big gate of Coulterville Pen and I felt better because this was the place I found her first and I could remember better here even if I couldn't ever find her again.

I was mugged and printed all over again and this time I got a new number.

I pulled on the denims and jacket and a screw took me into the office of the prison psychiatrist. There I sat, waiting on a bench. There was a clock on the wall and I watched its hand jerk in little jumps for the minutes. Thinking about Vida and wanting her, I shut my eyes because I felt tears coming.

Something touched my hand. I didn't want to open my eyes and have them see me crying. But the next thing I knew was the soft touch of her hair. Then her lips on mine. She whispered, "Cry now, before they come back," her arms going around me and pulling my head over to her breast. She was kneeling on the bench, holding me, when I heard the door rattle. Vida stepped down and stood with her arm around me.

I didn't care any more if they saw me holding on to her, I needed her so.

It was the old trusty, Dreamy O'Donnell. I gave Vida a hug with the old man looking square at us. Or at me.

His face was sharp and sad, in spite of the little smile that was always stamped around his mouth. He came over and put his hand on my shoulder, saying out of the side of his mouth, "Cold winter coming outside, kid. Eh? Don't you worry, kid. Stir ain't the worst place in the world. Not for us. Eh, kid?"

I just smiled at him. Vida reached up and kissed my ear. I kept my arm around her, not caring if the old man saw me or if the doctor saw me or if anybody saw me do it. I had her back again; that was the big thing.

O'Donnell watched me with his sad old eyes. Finally he said, "I tried to tip you off, kid. There's one thing you shouldn't never make out of the Dream Dust — or you'll spend your life in stir."

The door was rattling and I knew it would be the doctor so I took my arm from around Vida and she strolled over to the window to wait for me.

O'Donnell stood looking me over for a moment and then whispered out of the side of his mouth, "Well, kid, you're over the line now. I only hope she treats you right."

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Wherein Mr. Porges reveals yet another way in which that endlessly resourceful planet, Sol III, may be saved from alien invasion — an account not recommended to those who believe, like the authoritarian invader, that "events should be orderly, predictable."

The Liberator

by ARTHUR PORGES

EARTH WAS BEATEN, utterly and devastatingly outmatched. A mere fifteen space ships had easily, almost jauntily, as if enjoying the task, shattered the proud aerial army of the World Council. A few countries, notably England, with her centuries-old tradition of last ditch-resistance, fought on alone, but only briefly. It was hardly a fight at all. Not a single invading cruiser was even dented by the proximity-fused nuclear shells; nor were any alien soldiers known to have been injured, scared, or discommoded.

When a populous five-mile-square section of London had been neatly leveled by one potent missile, the English finally abandoned their quixotic stand, rejoining the Council to hear the enemy's terms.

It was obvious to the most patriotic terrestrial that earth's finest weapons and best-trained soldier scientists were hopelessly outclassed by a superior technology. Cetewayo's spear-wielding Zulus against the British Empire's rifles 200 years earlier had been a less one-sided conflict.

To make matters worse, there was not even the meager consolation of surrendering to beings of some outlandish higher biological structure. No palpitating jelly-creature with eleven purple eyes, four distinct sexes, and a never-satisfied craving for germanium oxide flopped obscenely from the shining flagship to overawe humanity.

Instead, there emerged with majestic theatricality the super-anthropomorphic figure of one General Milvan, who despite his origin in a distant galaxy, differed from earthmen chiefly in possessing an I.Q. which, if measurable at all by human standards, was at least 400. Further, although one school of terrestrial psychologists had long maintained that a really high I.Q. was inseparable from a strongly humanitarian personality, the general was a living refutation of the theory.

Almost seven feet tall, muscled like a physical culturist's dream, and

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nobly clad in skintight shimmering fabric, he was a breathtaking specimen indeed. The magnificent brow, wide-set luminous eyes — all the insignia of a superior being were his. Surely this was a god new dropped from Olympus — except for the memory of other scenes: a friendly air fleet blasted without warning; a dozen cities bombed with ruthless efficiency. That, and the arrogant sneer hovering about the general's mouth, spoiled the eye-filling tableau.

The conqueror introduced himself, to their surprise, in the anglicized French which was the World Council's official language, condescending to explain that while his minions were destroying airships and flattening communities, he had employed a few spare moments in scanning some textbooks and recordings salvaged from a razed town. The language, he complained, was hardly suitable for the finer nuances of thought, but might serve in this instance, since simple minds require simple ideas. It was apparent that he had mastered in an hour or two at least one good sized dictionary.

Standing before the Council, flanked by two silent bodyguards from his flagship, and with the victorious fleet poised menacingly above the World Capitol, he laid down the law to the sullen vanquished.

"Our former policy," he told them, "was one of extermination when dealing with the lower animals. At the moment, however, after a salutary demonstration of our capabilities, we are admitting a few of the inferior bipeds to a kind of rudimentary colonial status." It was clear from his manner that such a policy was caviar to this general. Obviously, only muddle-headed bureaucrats could have evolved so asinine a doctrine. Wipe out the vermin and repopulate; remold the world to the heart's desire; that's more direct and less troublesome. No hostile peoples to bother with afterwards.

"In return for your wholehearted cooperation," he concluded, "we shall consider using this planet as a base, at least for some time. You will be allowed to pursue a few of your disgusting activities when not serving the Empire. Here are the basic concessions we require, expressed in your own crude sign language." He handed a metallic sheet to the President, who scanned it eagerly, his eyes widening in dismay.

"But General," he protested, his voice heavy with horror, "these terms are insufferably harsh and degrading."

"Do not address me as an equal," came the sharp rebuke. "Lower your eyes to the floor, fold your arms, and call me 'Excellency.' As for the terms, they can easily be made more rigorous. You have not been asked to discuss — only to agree, and quickly."

"Sir," the President pleaded wildly, "this is barbarous! Not even the slaves of antiquity were so brutalized. As head of the Council, I beg you —"

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The general made a crisp, significant gesture, and from a guard at his left came the ominous hiss of a leveled weapon. The President gave a sobbing cry, and fell forward, smashing his face with a sickening impact against the desk. He writhed in momentary pain, a tiny stream of blood flowing from his crushed nose. A wisp of smoke rose lazily from his seared body.

There was a low, feral growl from the twenty-man Council; and one member, mumbling blasphemously, half arose. A more discreet companion dragged him down.

Watching coldly, the general said: "It is beyond your power to harm me in any way, but it would be very unwise to try. One word — one telepathic command — and my fleet will pulverize every city on earth. I have complete authority to colonize or destroy at my pleasure, although I have, much against my will, agreed to give colonization a fair trial, if possible. Now, quickly — who's the new President?"

A plump, gray-haired little man stood up with painful reluctance. In a shaky voice, his eyes lowered and arms folded, he said, "I am, Excellency. I w-was Vice President."

The general eyed him contemptuously, observing his flabby paunch, sallow skin, and terrified mien.

"You?" he jeered. "You rule the earth?"

"Yes, Excellency." His face reddened. "As head of the Council, I speak their will, and they govern the earth — in a strictly democratic —"

"You are empowered to accept my terms?" the general interrupted. "There is no higher authority?" He sounded skeptical. "I can't understand how such a primitive, defenseless civilization has escaped subjugation so long. However, if you really have no nominal superior here on earth —?"

"None, Excellency," the little man said with surprising firmness.

"*I must take exception!*"

The rumbling bass voice, edged with humorous malice, echoed hollowly among the marble columns. As one man the Council started, and even the general seemed momentarily human in his surprise. A commanding figure stood, dramatically posed, in the main entrance. Wearing a flamboyant black cloak, proud head high, dark slanted eyes glowing with ironic amusement, here was a being unknown, yet unmistakably familiar; a personage instantly recognizable to each terrestrial, but outside the immediate experience of any individual there. The tiny horns, the neat, well-trimmed goatee, the ropy tail — all were perfectly in key.

"Who are you?" General Milvan demanded, his tones charged with menace. He resented episodes of this variety; events should be orderly, predictable. "How did you get past my sentries?"

"This gentleman," the intruder said calmly, nodding at the President,

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who seemed all eyes and teeth, "is badly mistaken. I couldn't let his absurd declaration pass unchallenged. You see, General, *I* rule the earth!"

"Ah." The general showed pleasure at his own perspicacity. "I knew the cowardly fool must be lying." He studied the burly six feet of high-tension personality before him, and nodded grimly. "You're more the dominating type. Who are you?"

"I'm not fussy. 'Sticks and stones,' you know — no, you wouldn't, I guess. Just call me 'Satan.' Even 'Auld Clootie' will do; it has a charming informality. It makes me feel that my Scottish — ah — admirers are less aloof than other people; but no doubt that's the burr, for which I have a long-standing affection."

The general gaped at him, and there was sibilant comment among the excited councilmen. The President's bewildered eyes turned ludicrously from one to the other; he breathed heavily.

"*I* will call you what I choose," the general snapped, scowling. "*You* will address me as 'Excellency,' or I may have to deal with this cartool" — thrusting his chin towards the President — "in your place after all." (Here one guard choked with suppressed amusement. That absurd creature *did* look something like the cartool, a rodentlike animal so stupid it was just barely capable of mental triple integration.) "I don't permit insolence. Now, what about my guards?"

Satan shrugged. "I imagine they didn't see me. No doubt they're still faithfully on duty. They looked quite alert, I thought. Fine, husky fellows," he said expansively.

The general seemed incredulous; his face became congested. "They had every band under strict surveillance, from cosmic rays to sub-ether. You're lying!"

"Everything under surveillance," the Devil repeated in simple wonder. "How ingenious. Wish I knew which band — was that the term? — I used. The fact is, though, and I blush to admit it, that I haven't kept up with modern physics; too much math for one thing. I've rather lost touch with the whole field since stirring up a bit of mischief in Galileo's time. But if you like," he suggested brightly, "I'll go out and come back some other way. Maybe they'll see me then, and I'll get properly introduced. And I must say that's very considerate of you — to think about it. I was beginning to feel that you were just a wee bit — ah — brusque."

"Enough!" The general swelled with fury; he felt that somehow the usual roles were being unfairly reversed. Glowering at the Council, he rapped, "I am ordering my ships to continue the lesson. Obviously that's the only language you understand. In a moment you will hear the bombs. You" — pointing at the Devil — "are herewith deposed. I'm taking you back home

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for interrogation and biological research. You will learn humility at the hands of our official verminologists!"

"Sir, sir!" the President cried in anguish. "Don't listen to this — this crazy imposter." He attempted to shoulder Satan aside, only to rebound from his braced body. "You madman!" he snarled at the devil. "You're ruining everything. For God's sake, take off that silly disguise and apologize to his Excellency. Quick — or he'll destroy the earth!" He whirled back to the general, who had refurbished his sneer. "Don't you see, Excellency, he's just a poor maniac in a traditional costume. How he got in here —"

"Gentlemen, please." The Devil's voice was like honey dripping from its comb. "You're both so hasty. I assure you I'm quite sane. I've sustained my end of many a brilliant debate. There was Luther, for example, so badly outwitted that he actually hurled an inkwell at me. It was indelible ink, too, and didn't wear off for days." He turned to the distraught President. "Just go back and sit down; the general will excuse you, I'm sure. He and I will continue our little discussion. It isn't often I meet such an upstanding — ah — prospect." He beamed at the conqueror.

"Now what I'm getting to, General, is merely this. Any destruction in these parts is my prerogative. I don't permit poaching. In all fairness, I think you ought to colonize elsewhere. That's reasonable enough, isn't it?"

The general glared at him, speechless with rage. He gave a sharp order, and from his two flank attendants beams reached out like pale wands. They played fluorescently against the devil's deep chest. Instantly the black cloak was smoldering. A grim smile twisted the general's lips; he waited.

And Satan burst into flames. His body became a roaring pillar of golden fire. There were loud cracklings, and an occasional greasy pop. As the general and his men watched with satisfaction, the flames shrank, flickered knee-high momentarily, and died out. A small pile of silvery ashes stood there, smoking sulphurously.

The general gave another order. An attendant sprang forward, drew a pouch from his pack, and with a small shovel-like implement proceeded to scoop up the hot cinders.

"These will be analyzed," the general said, half to himself. "A remarkable being; too bad we couldn't capture —"

"Gently, please," said a booming voice. "After all, those are *my* remains!"

The general whirled, his face oddly distorted. Once more the Devil stood in the doorway. This time his cloak was a rich gaudy scarlet.

"I was going to gather them myself," Satan grinned. "I never leave ashes on people's rugs!"

The general took a single instinctive step backwards, then stiffened reso-

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lutely. He issued a brief command, spitting out the alien, queerly inflected words in a near hysterical voice. Obediently one soldier sprang towards the door on some urgent errand, only to stop, baffled, on finding the Devil there first. Alighting from his prodigious leap, Satan blocked the exit, baring huge canines in a satirical smirk.

"Going somewhere?" he inquired brightly. "You didn't raise your hand!"

The guard hesitated, glanced at the general, who nodded, then magnificently courageous, flung himself upon the Devil with a dagger-like instrument. His companion leaped to assist him.

There was a sodden smack as the dagger drove home. What followed was anticlimax. The soldier wrenched at the buried weapon, obviously thirsting to deliver another stroke. Dismay spread over his clean-cut features. Amazed and unhappy, he then tried to let go of the hilt, but his hand refused to obey. The Devil watched coyly, seemingly oblivious of the second man stalking him from behind. The new assailant held a massive truncheon. He raised this high in the air with both hands, and grunting with his strained effort, brought it down squarely upon Satan's occiput. It sounded exactly like hitting a coconut with a sledge hammer; the whole Council winced.

But the Devil registered only mild surprise. The first man, battering now with his free hand and both heavy boots, found himself stuck to Satan like flypaper.

"This is an idea right from *Uncle Remus*," the Devil told them cheerfully. He winked at the fascinated Council. " 'Tar-Baby.' Now the fellow in back; he's stuck, too."

Frozen in place, the general seemed to have lost interest in the proceedings; he appeared to be listening, a look of consternation on his face.

"The bombs," he muttered. "I gave the command long ago. There's no contact; why don't they —?"

"Oh, there won't be any bombs," the Devil volunteered. One of the men stuck to his mighty frame sneezed loudly, and Satan wiped his nose with a checkered handkerchief. "Don't thank me," he said genially. "It's just that this is my best cloak; you soldiers burned Heaven out of the black one! No," he repeated to the general, who seemed slightly dazed, "there won't be any bombs. By now, your fleet is in my power."

Even as he spoke, a green imp, the size of a small monkey, slipped through the door, grinned sardonically at the Council, and tugged at Satan's sleeve. The Devil bent over; the imp whispered in one hairy, pointed ear. Satan smiled.

"In your power!" the general roared, throwing his great noble head back. "You lie! No armed force in the whole universe could capture fifteen Valonian battleships without smashing this solar system to rubble."

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"Master," the imp said in a reedy voice, "the ships are ours."

"My cruisers!" the general groaned.

"Don't worry," the Devil reassured him, pleasantly solicitous. "The witches, vampires, and other — ah — units have kept your flagship intact and manned, although," he added regretfully, "I fear that one of the vampires has disregarded my orders about eating between meals, and your vessel lacks a navigator. Your other ships, of course, are being destroyed."

The general gulped, unable to speak.

"However, I've no doubt you can navigate. You seem like a bright chap."

"You're letting me go?" the general asked wonderingly.

"That's right. You will serve as an object lesson to the Valonian Empire. Tell your people that the earth is mine. Any imperialistic fleet from their system will meet with harsher treatment next time. Now clear out, and take these men with you; they're pulling my cloak out of shape." Instantly both soldiers found themselves free. Hurriedly they joined the crestfallen general. The devil pulled the dagger from his chest, examined it critically, and tossed it at their feet. "My assistants will escort you as far as the orbit of Jupiter. Don't be foolish enough to return for a sneak Parthian shot. Outguessing primitive life forms" — the general winced — "is routine for me; I've had centuries of practice. On your way."

As the general slunk out, Satan turned to the spellbound Councilmen. "I shouldn't bother to tell the public about this, if I were you," he admonished them. "For one thing, they wouldn't believe a word of it. Besides, I shall consider any loose talk about today's happenings as a personal affront, and deal hardly with the tattler. Better give the Army — or what's left of it — the credit." He winked slyly. "If people knew of my existence at first hand, they'd become offensively good, not through inner virtue, but purely animal fear. And He — that is, I — wouldn't want that."

The President was on his feet. In a quavering voice he ventured, "But why have *you* saved us?"

"Ah. A good question." The Devil listened for a moment to the diminishing whine of mighty engines outside.

"There goes the general," he mused aloud. "Quite a fool for all his executive talent as a wholesale murderer. He's leading me right back to his own territory. You know," he told the staring, immobile Council confidingly, "judging from the general's hyper-human traits, there ought to be excellent pickings for me on his home planet. As for your question, little man, there used to be a song about 'You gotta quit kicking my dog around.' "

And bellowing with exultant laughter, he vanished.

Earth was free again.

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INDEX TO VOLUME FIVE — JULY 1953–DECEMBER 1953

ABERNATHY, ROBERT: Professor Schlucker's Fallacy....Nov. 36
ANDERSON, POUL: Three Hearts & Three Lions (part 1)....Sept. 3
Three Hearts & Three Lions (conclusion)....Oct. 84
ANTHONY, JOHN: The Hypnoglyph..July 25
BARRY, JEROME: Milk of Paradise...Dec. 61
BESTER, ALFRED: Star Light, Star Bright....July 113
Time Is the Traitor....Sept. 103
BINDER, EANDO: A Warning to the Furious....Aug. 117
BOUCHER, ANTHONY: The Model of a Science Fiction Editor (*verse*).July 61
BRETNOR, R. & NEVILLE, KRIS: Gratitude Guaranteed....Aug. 3
BROWN, BILL: The Tronk and the Trumpet....Oct. 74
BROWN, FREDRIC: Rustle of Wings..Aug. 23
CARLSON, ESTHER: Night Life....Dec. 39
Long Distance....Oct. 19
CARTMILL, CLEVE: My Lady Smiles.Nov. 102
CHANDLER, R.: The Bronze Door...Oct. 47
CLINGERMAN, MILDRED: The Word..Nov. 121
COUPLING, J. J.: Mr. Kinkaid's Pasts.Aug. 28
DANCEY, MAX & DEWEY, G. GORDON: Two-Way Stretch....Dec. 3
DAVIS, LAVINIA R.: Randall....Aug. 83
DEANGELIS, GUY: Door to Door....Dec. 73
DE CAMP, L. SPRAGUE & PRATT, FLETCHER: One Man's Meat....Sept. 54
The Untimely Toper....July 33
DERLETH, AUGUST & REYNOLDS, MACK: The Adventure of the Snitch in Time....July 17
DEWEY, G. GORDON & DANCEY, MAX: Two-Way Stretch....Dec. 3
DICK, PHILIP K.: Expendable....July 99
DRYFOOS, DAVE: Man....July 40
DUNSANY, LORD: Told Under Oath.Aug. 70
FARMER, PHILIP JOSÉ: Attitudes....Oct. 3
GARRETT, RANDALL: I've Got a Little List (*verse*)....Nov. 101
GOLDSMITH, R. M.: Yankee Exodus.July 51
GRESHAM, W. L.: The Star Gypsies.July 3
The Dream Dust Factory....Dec. 106
GRIFFITH, ANN W.: Captive Audience.Aug. 52
HAMM, THELMA D.: Gallie's House..Sept. 96
HARNESS, C. L.: The Chessplayers..Oct. 36
HENDERSON, ZENNA: Food to All Flesh....Dec. 31
HUBBARD, P. M.: MS Found in a Vacuum....Aug. 50
JAMES, HENRY: The Friends of the Friends....July 62
LORD, MINDRET: Dr. Jacobhus Meliflore's Last Patient....Nov. 55
MCCLINTIC, WINONA: The Unquiet Grave (*verse*)....Aug. 95
The Antiquary (*verse*)....July 83
The Vampire (*verse*)....July 16
A Lady's Privilege (*verse*)....Dec. 45
MILLER, LION: The Worp Reaction.Sept. 73
MOORE, WARD: Measure of a Man..Aug. 63
MUDGETT, HERMAN W.: The Naming of Names (*verse*)....Oct. 116
NEARING, JR., H.: The Cerebrative Psittacoid....Aug. 99
The Gastronomical Error....Dec. 85
NELSON, ALAN: Silenzia....Sept. 61
NEVILLE, KRIS: Worship Night....Nov. 90
NEVILLE, KRIS & BRETNOR, R.: Gratitude Guaranteed....Aug. 3
PHILLIPS, PETER: The Warning....Sept. 123
PORGES, ARTHUR: Mop-Up....July 44
The Ruum....Oct. 25
The Liberator....Dec. 118
PRATT, FLETCHER & DE CAMP, L. SPRAGUE: Untimely Toper....July 33
One Man's Meat....Sept. 54
RANDOLPH, VANCE: Blood in the Cellar....Nov. 89
READY, W. B.: The Hound of Cullen.Nov. 70
REDMAN, BEN RAY: At the Door...Aug. 114
REYNOLDS, MACK & DERLETH, AUGUST: The Adventure of the Snitch in Time....July 17
ROBIN, RALPH: Open Ears....Aug. 77
ROGERS, KAY: Letter to a Tiger....Oct. 117
ROYCE, STEWART: "...Fight in the Hills"....Nov. 60
SALE, RICHARD: The Old Oaken Eight-Ball....Sept. 83
SEABRIGHT, IDRIS: Judgment Planet.July 87
The Altruists....Nov. 43
SHECKLEY, ROBERT: The King's Wishes....July 104
SIMAK, CLIFFORD D.: Shadow Show..Nov. 3
STURGEON, T.: The Silken-Swift....Nov. 104
WELLMAN, MANLY WADE: One Other....Aug. 37
WILLIAMS, ROBERT MOORE: Aurochs Came Walking....Dec. 46
WOLF, LEONARD: Facts About Robots I (*verse*)....Nov. 120
WOOD, CHRISTOPHER: Mrs. Dalrymple's Cat....Sept. 76

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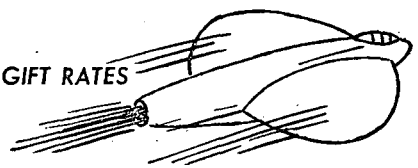

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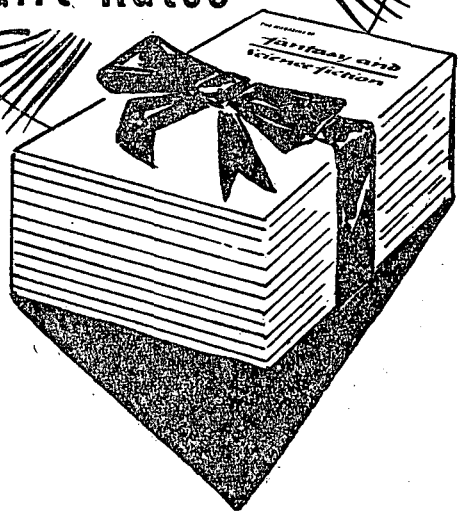

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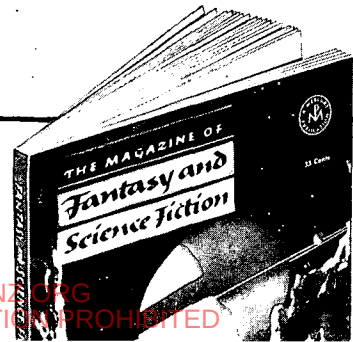

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